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FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES
BULL-WAGON BOSS
YOUNG PETER SHARPE RULED WITH AN IRON HAND—WITH TRAITORS IN THE TRAIN AND THE RED MENACE WITHOUT, THE FATE OF THE FOOLHARDY PILGRIMS RESTED ON HIS UNCEASING VIGILANCE.
by BILL COOK
SCOURGE OF THE SAGEBRUSH
by
EDGAR L. COOPER
INDIAN DAWN—
AND NO POWDER!
by
JED AGEE
THE
DALTON GANG—
FRONTIER KILLERS and OUTLAWS
by BUCK RINGO
WHEN RUSTLERS RODE
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BULL-WAGON BOSS

A Great Novelet of Covered Wagon Days

By BILL COOK

Treachery within that barricaded wagon train, red terror without. But to young, rawhide tough Peter Sharpe, bull-wagon boss, it made no never-mind. His rules and regulations—"A dead Injun is a good 'un" and "A rope and a wagon-tongue for traitors!"

WESTWARD Ho! Ten miles west of Independence, Missouri, in the bright golden dawn of the first of June, 1854, the temporary camp of the Woodward Party scrambled from its blankets at the blatant summons of a bugle.

Standing beside his liver-colored mustang, a stone's throw from the grouped leaders of the train, a man in fringed buckskin watched the proceedings with a calm and practiced eye. As scout and hunter for the wagon train, Peter Sharpe was

responsible for its safe conduct across the Overland Trail to California.

He was a tall man, with a good breadth of shoulders. His carefully measured and gayly ornamented jacket and breeches were the handiwork of patient Shoshone maidens, and at first glance the man might have been mistaken for a stalwart savage. But his eyes, set in a face as dark as any Indian's, made an observer think of chips of ice-sheathed granite. He had thick black hair that curled at the back of his neck where it brushed his collar. His face was evenly featured, lean jawed and unlined, for Peter Sharpe, despite his sternness, was a young man, not yet boasting a twenty-fourth birthday.

He leaned now with his elbows on the saddle, watching the busy scene before him. The brim of his flat-crowned black beaver was tilted low over his eyes.

"Some pretty hard lookin' hombres," he mused, "An' some soft ones, too. Darn near every state in the Union represented."

It made the scout think of that time more than eight years ago when he, as a mere boy running away from his home on a farm back in York state, had thrilled to the life of the raw frontier. Here they were, some boastfully brave, others timid, but all eager for the great adventure. Straightening his shoulders he eased the weight of the heavy dragoon Colt revolver at his belt, felt the sheath that secured the long butcher knife at the other side. Then he examined his saddle girth and the long barreled "buffalo" gun that slung from beneath the skirt. His horse shied a quick kick at him and Sharpe leaped sideways with the smooth swiftness of a mountain lion. Even in action he made one think of the primitive savage.

"Save yore pepper, you son of a mustang," laughed the scout. "Yuh got a long walk ahead o' yuh, an' plenty swimmin'. Let's ramble." He was in the saddle in one move and spun the horse toward the head of the train.

Men, women and children were scurrying about building fires, preparing breakfast, rounding up their hobbled stock. Drivers and herdsmen bellowed frontier oaths as they yoked their oxen to the sturdy prairie schooners. Long blacksnake whips crackled.

"At last!" shouted Caleb Newton, a ruddy New Englander. "It's jump-off day. Ho for California!"

"Catch up! Catch up!" shouted grizzled old Captain Matt Skelton, who was known among the mountain men as Captain Bones. Seated in a high Mexican saddle astride a rusty black mule, the bearded frontiersman was the guide for the party. Old Matt and young Peter Sharpe had been cronies for the past three years and they worked together like a well-broken team.

Mounted close by Old Matt, sat Frank Woodward, an emigrant from the East who had been newly elected "captain" of the party, learning now the routine of starting a covered wagon train on the march. All down the line, amid hustle and bustle, and accompanied by the grunts of a colorful band of Kaw Indians, the wagons began to move, falling into a column as Old Matt shouted his commands.

The air was filled with snapping whip lashes and profanity. Women and children cheered bravely. Clouds of dust rose over the prairie. Stocky young oxen leaned into their yokes. Saddle leather creaked. They were off! Over the rolling prairie and on into the far wilderness that was the great West.

THE scout rode out to a point near the leaders and slouched in his saddle easily. Close up with Old Matt and Woodward he saw a couple of Delaware Indian chieftains riding paint ponies and dressed in full regalia from the ceremonial long-tailed eagle feather bonnet to the brass jingle bells strung into the fringe of their leggings. The sight of them brought a fleeting smile to the scout's steely eyes.

He could hear Old Matt telling Woodward and the other mounted emigrants that they had nothing to fear from the redskins as long as they pretended to recognize them as guards on this first short leg of the trip. "These Delaware bucks," explained Old Matt, "are from a tribe that are fierce fighters. They're pretty well softened up by association with the whites around here, but the Kaws are afraid o' them. So we let 'em believe that they're performin' a valuable service for us by escortin' us through Kaw territory. Savvy? A coupla sacks o' tobaccy and a coupla 'Hows' an' they'll turn back when

we get beyond the Kaw huts. Gotta handle these savages diplomatic like; saves hair, hide an' headaches."

The picturesquely decorated savages rode solemnly enough, their trappings jangling. The dignity of their bearing and the fierce looks they bent upon the staring Kaws filled both the savages and the emigrants with awe.

"I should think," remarked Woodward in an undertone to Old Matt, "that our soldiers would have this Indian situation under control. Why, when we left Pennsylvania we understood that the savages were put down completely. That there was nothing to fear from Indians."

"Pardner," chuckled the bearded guide. "Injuns is injuns. They ain't like us whites. No injuns are put down like yuh say in this here west. Some, like these here, is changin' their way o' livin' 'cause they kin hang around white settlements an' steal plenty. When we git beyond Fort Kearney we're mebbe meetin' the other kind o' Injuns."

Woodword's face paled a little and his frown darkened. He looked away, across the sweep of the prairie; grass, tall, hock-high waving grass, as far as his straining eyes could see. Nothing else. He shook his head.

Old Matt observed the worried look. "Brother," he said, "this train is in good hands. I know the route frontwards an' backwards. Yuh see thet lad over there. It's Peter Sharpe, yore scout. Yeh. Some day I'm gonna tell yuh 'bout him. White men an' Injuns calls him "Dead-shot.' He knows every Injun tribe from the Missouri to the Pacific. Greatest scout in the west, 'cept mebbe Kit Carson 'r Jim Bridger. If this train runs into Injun danger stick to Peter Sharpe."

BY evening of the third day out the Woodward Train reached and crossed Bull Creek. At this point the California and the Santa Fe trails parted. The party now swung northwest toward the Platte and they made their camp beside the cottonwoods under the curious eyes of a motley gathering of Indian men, women and children who, with their yapping, snarling dogs pestered the emigrants for food and trinkets.

As dusk fell, Beth Benning, a golden haired, statuesque daughter of Vermont, going overland with her father, Amos Benning, and her mother, Dinah, turned back to the Benning wagon to get a shawl for her mother. She climbed from the wheel hub to the narrow dashboard and reached into the shadowy depths of the vehicle. Her white hand touched the cool dark skin of a sneaking Kaw buck. Stifling a cry, she sprang backward, her eyes wild with fear and alarm.

Almost into the arms of a passing man she landed, and her father, with some others nearby, came rushing toward her.

The man who had halted her backward fall was standing the trembling young woman on her feet, rather awkwardly, it was true, but gently.

"Somethin' scare yuh, miss?" he inquired. "Yuh lit down outa there like you had come on a sidewinder."

There were several of the emigrants clustered around now and Amos Benning bent over his daughter solicitously, patting her and trying to soothe her. "What was it, Beth?" he asked. "Did you fall or—did something frighten you like Sharpe said?"

Beth Benning turned her eyes upward toward the dark cavernous interior of the canvas-covered wagon, and her lips quivvered. "I touched a naked—naked flesh—something in there. I thought it was an Indian."

Peter Sharpe looked at the girl, made a quick motion to the emigrants for silence. Then, with a sudden giant stride, he was on the wagon and had plunged inside. Amos Benning drew his heavy pistol and edged nearer. But Peter Sharpe had scarcely disappeared when those around the wagon heard a howl of pain and Sharpe reappeared. He was dragging a big Indian buck backward by the hair, and with a warning shout he flung the redskin bodily across the seat and downward to sprawl upon the sod.

Quick as a flash Sharpe leaped down himself, hooked his powerful hand into the flabby skin over the Indian's belly and jerked the thief close up to him. Sharpe's face was less than four inches from the redskin's and the watchers saw the blood-shot black eyes of the savage blink with fear.

"You dirty sneakin' coyote!" The scout

spat the words in the savage's face. He tightened his steel grip on the culprit's belly, then spun him about and delivered a hearty kick at the red man's rear, sending him stumbling into the shadows and out of sight.

The Benning girl had stood by her father, her hand clutching his thick arm, her eyes fixed on Peter Sharpe. As Sharpe turned his back on the departing red man and wiped his hands on his soft leather breeches, she found her tongue.

"Thank you, sir," she smiled. "You happened along in the nick of time. I'm sorry I had to tread on your foot."

"Never noticed it, miss—" Sharpe paused and looked closer at her father. "Oh, hello," he waved his hand. "It's Mister Benning—"

"It is, indeed," chuckled the Vermonter. "And this is my daughter. Beth, this is Mister Peter Sharpe. He's the scout and chief hunter of our train."

Sharpe muttered awkwardly and the girl made a little curtsey. He lifted his hat by its floppy brim, and mumbled something about "no more trouble in *this* camp anyways." With that he was gone, moving off through the wagons and staggered cook fires. But he carried with him a feeling that was distinctly new and foreign in his frontier experience. She had very beautiful golden hair in thick braids, and she was quite lovely of face, with her creamy skin and those brave blue eyes. At least, in the flickering light of the surrounding fires, they had looked blue to him.

THE great bowl of the vast blue sky darkened. With the dark came a million stars. Old Captain Matt Skelton ordered the guard posted. There was, of course, danger, he said, from Indian raids. Trains had to watch their stock, and keep "an eye skinned" for sparks from the cook-fires which might set off the grass.

According to trail custom every adult man had to stand his turn on guard duty along the route. Each party, before it started, agreed on the executive officers who would have charge of the train. Their word would be law en route. The Woodward Party was no exception. Frank Woodward had been elected captain of the train, or nominal leader. Captain Matt Skelton was appointed guide, with Peter Sharpe as scout and chief hunter. A Southerner named George Flynn, who with his wife, Lavinia, had come from Maryland, was sergeant of the guard. Flynn selected his guards as the occasion or camp site required. There were also drivers, herdsmen, mechanics and carpenters, for there would be repair work aplenty before the train reached the sunny slopes of California.

It was on this third night out from the jump-off that Flynn, making his rounds of the "forted" camp, heard the call of a sentry guarding the southern, or Bull Creek, side of the camp.

"Horses comin'!" shouted the sentry. Flynn recognized the man called "Kentucky." "Somebody crossin' at the ford."

Flynn knew that this was unusual. A party crossing the muddy Bull Creek after dark must have an urgent reason for reaching this side. And they were heading directly for the Woodward camp which was a full quarter mile off the trail itself.

With Kentucky following at his shoulder, Flynn drew his pistol and advanced through the dark to meet the unseen visitors. The sound of hard driven animals drew nearer. Flynn's sharp eyes made out a single mounted figure. Still other hoofs were coming.

"Slow down there, brother," ordered Flynn coolly. There were all kinds and colors of renegades roaming the frontier and Flynn waited grimly for what the night was bringing him. "Halt or die!" he shouted as he made out horse and rider. A recklessly driven light wagon with a span of mules was some distance behind. The lone rider pulled up his horse, and Flynn, cocking his weapon, shouted: "Who are yuh and what's yore business, mister?"

"You damn fool!" bellowed the rider. "Don't you know who I am? Isn't that the Woodward Train camped right there? Let me pass!"

"Hold yore horse, big mouth, right where you are!" snarled Flynn, his dander up. No creature on two legs, or on horseback, was calling him a damn fool—without apologizing. "I've got a hunk of hell aimed right at yore wishbone. You climb down off that horse." The wagon and a blowing span of mules came rushing up and Flynn touched Kentucky. "Hold a

gun on that outfit, while I set this ruffian straight. Get down, bad man, an' keep your paws up like a trained bear while I look yuh over."

Fuming with rage the stranger gingerly dismounted, elevated his arms and stepped away from the horse, a big, black animal with froth dripping from nostrils, smeared on its chest.

"What do you mean by—?" began the stranger.

"Answer my questions!" barked George Flynn, ramming his pistol into the other's middle. "Who are yuh and what do you want after dark in our camp?"

"Name's Torrand, Robert Torrand!" snarled the man probing the pale starlight for a glimpse of Flynn's face. "You'll very soon know who I am and why I'm here, and—I'll see that you are properly disciplined. Why, I organized this train, myself—planned the whole expedition. I—"

"And what's this runaway peddler wagon?" demanded Flynn, indicating the halted mule team and its vague driver.

Robert Torrand was almost beside himself with rage, but the steady eyes of his challenger were insistent. "This is my outfit," growled Torrand, "driven by my man—my darkey—Pluto."

Chuckling softly, George Flynn ordered Torrand to march ahead of him into camp, Kentucky coming behind with the wagon, darkey and Torrand's horse. Near Woodward's wagon they located the headquarters night fire and Flynn nudged Torrand with his pistol. "Step up there mister an' speak yore piece."

WOODWARD, to Flynn's surprise, recognized Robert Torrand almost at once. He drew him nearer to the fire. Somebody flung some fresh willow branches on the blaze.

"Mister Torrand!" shouted Frank Woodward excitedly. "I'm happy, indeed, to welcome you. We'd given you up for lost. Here, set down here and rest. You must have ridden hard. Shake hands with Mister Benning and Mister. . . ."

Men crowded about them in the firelight. Sharpe, the scout, seated on a blanket, his back against a huge wagon wheel and within arm's reach of Old Matt, studied the newcomer silently. Torrand, a rather handsome, dashing, dark-haired man with flashing black eyes and a small stylish mustache, was the center of an interested group.

"I regret, gentlemen, deeply," Torrand was saying, "if I have been the cause of your delay in starting. Unfortunately I was compelled to remain in St. Louis longer than I anticipated." He spoke slowly, with a measured, careful manner which struck the listening scout as being an effort. Something about the man, Sharpe told himself, that did not ring true.

"Business connected with my Louisiana plantations," he summed up his explanation, shrugging. "You see, there's a good deal of talk going around about—well—about this nigger question between the South an' the No'th."

"We're mighty glad, Mister Torrand," ventured Amos Benning, "that you were able to catch up with us. You say you grow cotton, eh?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Torrand. "Cotton."

Peter Sharpe, his alert grey eyes missing nothing, was positive that he saw a peculiar smile flit swiftly across the face of a man he knew as Ned Cleyton. Cleyton was said to be a cotton planter from Georgia.

FEW wagon trains left the jumping-off point during those hectic years better equipped or manned for the Overland journey. The Woodward party was a compact, well-armed outfit with strong wagons, brave men and women, plenty of supplies and—money. Besides it had the guidance of two such experienced frontiersmen as Peter Sharpe and Captain Skelton.

It was a cheerful band of emigrants that finally, after twenty-one days of fighting storm and sun, fording rushing torrent and rafting wagons and stock across swollen waters, swung their teams truly westward on the south bank of the Muddy Platte. The next day they would rest at Fort Kearney. Still nothing warned them of the shadow through which they marched.

Death, nevertheless, had marked them even before the first man of the party knew he was actually going overland. Almost a thousand miles from the banks of the Platte, the fate of these emigrants

was sealed in a squalid gambling shack at Natchez-Under-the-Hill. This was in February and, while drunken derelicts quarreled in the reeking bar outside, one man paced the rag-carpeted floor of a shabby room. He walked nervously, his thumbs hooked into his gun belt, listening, black eyes watching first door, then window.

The night outside was dark; a storm was threatening. Along the Mississippi in the blackness a freighter blew for a landing. The sound of staggering footsteps reached the man behind the bolted door. Voices were raised in cheers, laughter and obscene oaths.

"Tennessee Bob" Delaine stopped his pacing of the floor. Some one was approaching his door. Damn him; what had delayed him tonight of all nights. There came a rapping, soft, in signal.

Delaine stepped swiftly to the door, grasped the bolt. His black eyes were narrowed to the merest slits as if he would see through the thick wooden panel. Then he called softly, his lips close to the jamb. "What do they ask for a Memphis?" he demanded.

The reply was prompt, and Delaine could feel that the man outside was panting.

"Two mint juleps."

Throwing the bolt, Delaine jerked open the door, and into the room stepped a heavy set, middle-aged man whose boots "sqooshed" as he entered, leaving muddy, wet tracks on the worn carpet. Closing the door swiftly and bolting it, Delaine clutched his visitor fiercely and peered into his face. The newcomer's smallish blue eyes blinked in the lamplight and he rubbed a hairy hand across his face leaving a broad streak of dirt in the sweat. Delaine shook the man's shoulders urgently.

"Well?" whispered Delaine hoarsely. "Well, what news? What's happening? What kept you, you worthless tramp? Speak up!"

Still panting, the fellow in the soggy boots tore himself free of his companion's grasp and backed to a creaking chair. Tearing open his tie and ripping his collar away from his throat he glared back at his tormentor. "Let me ketch mah breath, Tennessee," he gasped. "Had to run fer mah ver' life. The Trace an' us is partin' company quicker'n scat. Yuh pack yo' trinkets?"

Delaine straightened himself with a jerk and drew a cheroot from his vest pocket. With a cool deliberateness he lighted it and blew a cloud of heavy smoke full in his visitor's face. It made the man cough and sputter.

"Damn yuh, Tennessee!" he cried, then lowered his voice. "Here I am nigh suffocatin' fer air an' you—Yo're goin' ter hang afore sunrise!"

"The hell you say!" snorted Tennessee. "Mebbe it'll rain anyway. Calm yourself, Cleyton, an' tell me what you heard."

NED CLEYTON blurted out the news excitedly in a volley of whispers. He'd come up along under the hill and run through swamp in the dark for he had not dared come down the open road. It was only too true. Vigilantes were gathering. He had overheard a group back of a stable up in town. Heard Delaine's name spoken. He saw the men with the rope, armed with pistols and rifles. The murder of those two travelers in the cabin up the Trace had been tied to Delaine.

"They're goin' to hang yuh if they ketch yuh. A feller said he'd see yuh kick yore last iffen it took him the rest o' his life." Delaine shrugged and smiled savagely. Cleyton continued: "An' they'll hang me, too, if they ketch me with yuh. I'm makin' tracks."

"Sit still," ordered Delaine. "Listen to me. I've been living by my wits since I was pupped. No Natchez mob will ever hang me—nor you. You and I will change our field of operations. Look, Cleyton, I've the greatest plan all worked out. You stick with me and I'll make you one of the two richest men on this continent."

To Cleyton, who had ridden the Long Trace with Delaine for years and watched the man plan and execute plunder killings, nothing was impossible. Delaine always got scot free. Even now—well they were not caught yet. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Ever hear of California and Oregon?" Cleyton nodded, and Delaine went on. "We're going to California overland, but we're not going to dig for gold. We'll take our fortune with us."

The burly Cleyton listened while Delaine talked. The plan was simplicity itself. Funny nobody had ever thought of it before. They'd organize their own wagon train, enlisting substantial business men and farmers, men who would pack their life savings with them enticed by the newspapers' reports of quick riches, lush farm lands and unheard-of business possibilities.

"So," Delaine concluded. "We're gathering a nice party of men with cash. Cash they expect to use to go into business with, to buy property, machinery, tools, to purchase furs from the trappers and gold from the miners. Big business, Ned. And when we get this crowd of stupid emigrants at a likely place in the hills, we'll just put the ax and knife to them at night. Whoever finds them will blame it on the Indians."

For a long moment Delaine watched Cleyton and waited while the idea struck home. Cleyton's mouth fell open and he stared at Delaine in frank admiration. "That's keen, Tennessee—keen. We cut their throats and ride off with everything in their pokes." ....

"Exactly," agreed Delaine whose ego, by this time, completely dominated the man. "I'm dealing you in, share and share alike. We'll live like kings in California—and we'll be moving out of line of the storm that's working up between the North an' the South over this damn nigger question. Are you with me, Ned?"

Cleyton grasped Delaine's smooth "dealing" fingers. As a crooked dealer Delaine had no equal on the Mississippi. Quick as a panther, tricky as a weasel and as ruthless as a starving wolf, his reputation had spread up and down the river. Now, even at this moment with the law and enraged citizens organizing at last to run him to earth like the beast that he was, Tennessee Bob Delaine planned the wholesale and deliberate massacre of an overland wagon train.

It was a fiendish, diabolical plot and Delaine with his partner, Cleyton, lost no time setting it in motion. Their first move was, of course, to escape from the South with whole skins. To this end Cleyton stole two horses, and, together, the pair raced north along the river traveling at night by a narrow, little-used trail. At Palmer's Landing, they sauntered aboard the steamer for St. Louis.

Ned Cleyton, posing as a Georgia planter, according to the plan; left Delaine at this point, and would meet him at Independence as a stranger.

"You'll know me," Delaine instructed him carefully, "as Mister Robert Torrand. And I'm a wealthy Louisiana planter. I'll organize you as one of the party, and we'll hire a half dozen breeds there to do the dirty work for us. Savvy?"

The die was cast.

FOR seven whole days the Woodward party followed the south bank of the Platte due west. They splashed through Plum Creek without a mishap. The prairie breeze made a rippling endless ocean of the waving grass and Peter Sharpe, scouting a mile or more in advance of the train, experienced more difficulty finding wood for the fire than he did feed and water for the stock. The river was always near and spring had smiled on the grass roots.

As they neared the forks of the river in mid morning of the 28th of June those riding at the head of the train observed a horseman coming toward them at an easy lope. It was Peter Sharpe as they soon made out.

As Sharpe drew near he swung his mount about and motioned with his hand, letting his horse fall in beside the leaders.

"Band o' Pawnees just breakin' camp up on the Forks," he said. "Can't tell which way they'll move." The scout paused an instant. If the redskins had not seen him, and were really peaceful, there would be no need to alarm the whole train. Perhaps the party could manage to just avoid meeting them: they could prevent trouble. "Mebbe we'd want to slow down an' let them get on the move. I think they're just changin' camps, but Pawnees are a stubborn lot."

Old Captain Matt nodded to Woodward and he, in turn, sent word back along the train to slow down.

Riding close enough to the leaders to have heard the reason for Sharpe's return, Robert Torrand, astride his champing horse, burst out with a lurid oath. Ever since he had joined the train that night on Bull Creek, this man had kept much to

himself, riding hour after hour in thoughtful silence, spending his time in camp seated by himself as though brooding. Now he flared up hotly.

"What does this mean?" he shouted. "Why are we slowing down? Good Lord, gentlemen, we move slow enough. These damn oxen are wearing me out holding my horse in. Speed up, I say!"

With a glance at the patient Woodward and the tactful silent Old Captain Matt, Peter Sharpe eased around in his saddle and faced the speaker. Grey eyes met black and clashed. Torrand stared at Sharpe as if the young scout were a stable-boy.

"You'll live longer, mister," advised Sharpe, "if you keep a shorter tongue in yore head."

"Where I come from, young man," retorted Torrand, "hired hands are taught respect for their superiors."

Sharpe spun his horse. Captain Matt shouted. "Peter! Hey, Peter! Leave him be—yet a while. He ain't trail broke." The scout lifted his mount back into the wheel rut, joined his pardner. Captain Matt poked him in the ribs and asked him more about the Pawnees; how many of them there were, how many tepees?

The old timer prevented the drawing of pistols, but the spark had flashed. Sharpe had looked into Torrand's eyes and what he saw there warned him. The man had a vile temper. He'd bear careful watching.

That outburst by Torrand set the scout to thinking. Somehow or other the man did not seem to be everything he claimed. The more he thought of it, as he scanned the trail ahead, the more he became determined to keep an eye on Torrand. The fellow was a shirker and had a furtive manner around camp. "Might be," Sharpe told himself, "that this hombre is the one responsible for the grumblin' now an' then."

"Torrand is a hot-headed man," ventured Frank Woodward who always did his best to keep things running smoothly. "Don't stir him up, Peter. There's something about him that seems to have come to the surface since we started; something I never observed back in town when he first broached the subject of joining his train. I don't know what it is."

"You know, of course, gentlemen," Sharpe supplemented, "that there is something already stirring in this party. Yes, I know there was never an overland train yet that didn't fight over something. Sometimes mighty serious. But it's the kind of people in this train that make it different; makes the feeling I get sometimes as I ride up and down the train, 'r wander around the fires at night—I just don't savvy it."

"Might be this Torrand," mused Captain Matt. "He's been actin' funny, las' few days. Say," he looked behind him to see if Torrand was near, but the Louisiana planter had turned his horse and was riding beside one of the wagons almost a quarter mile back. "Say," he went on, "D'yuh think he's sore 'cause the train left 'thout him and then named itself after Woodward here. Mebbe he wanted to be captain an' all that."

"Sounds logical to me, Captain Matt," cut in Caleb Newton. "How about callin' a conference in our next camp and suggest reorganization?"

"There'll be none o' that," warned Peter Sharpe coldly, "while I'm scout for this train. We'll play the hand as she was dealt, win 'r lose."

And he meant it.

THE "lower crossing" of the Platte, really the South Platte at this point, was almost in sight of the wagons when one of those sudden drenching prairie rainstorms hit the train with all the ferocity of an avalanche. In a few minutes the ruts were running with muddy water, the wind ripped at the canvas coverings, beat into the faces of the men and women. Walking children and women were hurried into the wagons and the men yelled themselves hoarse in an effort to maintain order.

Wild yells filled the air all along the line. "Lash that canvas!" "Hold that team." "Keep 'em moving!" Sharpe and Woodward and Old Captain Matt rode back and forth furiously helping here, there, everywhere.

A shout went up from one of the rear wagons sinking fast in a deep soft rut. Men rushed ahorse and afoot, splashing through the rain. Ropes were lashed to the wagon; mounted men dallied them to saddle horns. There was a bedlam of

swearing and wind-smothered advice.

With a mighty effort they drew the mired Conestoga to firmer ground and the bull-whackers plied their whips. "Onward! Keep 'em moving!"

Straight through, was the order. Peter Sharpe roared above the bellow of the storm to Captain Matt. "Right on," he called. "Don't let them halt at the ford." He bawled orders to the ax-men and pushed them on ahead to the river to build rafts, find wood, hustle. The train must cross. Luck, in spite of the storm, was with them, Sharpe decided, for the Pawnees were nowhere in sight.

Fighting like soldiers they hit the water. Women and children screamed while men fought the current and the frightened beasts, but when night came the Woodward train was camped on the other side. Like drowned rats the men clustered about the feeble camp fires. The storm, characteristic of the region, stopped as suddenly as it began.

Near one of the fires, their eyes furtively searching the faces of those near them, stood Robert Torrand and a "Georgian" called Ned Cleyton. Bitter hatred smouldered in Torrand's black frown. Cleyton, on the other hand, seemed to be waiting.

"Which of the men here are pledged to my plan?" demanded Torrand.

Cleyton waited while Captain Matt brushed by with a pair of dry blankets, then: "I'll point 'em out to you as I get the chance. There's one o' them there now —the lean-jawed greaser with the beaded bullet pouch. He says to call him Pancho."

"Good," agreed Torrand, cooled down a bit. "Well, before we reach Ash Hollow I'll have the details all arranged. And say, by the way; who is this fellow Sharpe? How did he come to be hired?"

"Him," said Cleyton. "Oh, he's been ridin' overland trails for more'n eight years, they say. Been side-kickin' that old rooster, Captain Matt. They're always together, I guess. A tough pair, if you'd ask me."

"He won't be tough," mumbled Torrand, "with my knife in his heart."

After supper that night, by the cautious process of moving about and pausing momentarily beside each of the six cutthroats he had engaged for his bloody work, Cleyton managed to identify these men for the handsome Natchez killer. Even as he did so however, he resented the return of Torrand. He'd come to hate him. But for Torrand, he, Ned Cleyton, would be the leader of this crime clique. And his plan, his improvement on that of Torrand, had set him to thinking.

"With me passing the word," he muttered softly to himself, "I'd pretty quick manage to put the whole six o' them where plunder 'd do 'em damn little good."

This final coupe de grace made him think. It was *his* little trick. But suppose Torrand had this same plan in mind. Cleyton rubbed a trembling hand around his own throat, then looked at his fingers in the firelight as if he half expected to see them covered with blood.

The vast deep darkness of the night beyond the fires decided Cleyton's troubled mood.

He fingered the edge of the long knife in his belt and, began moving stealthily through the darkest shadows of the wagons. He knew where Torrand lay in his blankets. Past a half dozen fires he crawled, alert, nerves tingling. One well directed thrust in the dark—a soft gurgle —and then he, Cleyton—in California rich as Midas.

Craftily he reached toward the slumbering Torrand. His knife was raised; for an instant its deadly blade caught the light of a dying fire. And in that instant the soft sounds of night were shattered by the booming crash of a buffalo gun. Ned Cleyton sprawled dead, his knife driven to the hilt—in the sod a foot from Torrand's throat.

IV

THE death of the man known as Ned Cleyton, while it did not remove the deadly menace which threatened the unsuspecting emigrants, did create some little excitement that night and next morning in the camp before break-up. It was something of a mystery. Old Captain Matt, who slept like a cat, had been the one to catch the full, sharp silhouette of the crouching Cleyton in the very act of driving his knife into the sleeper. The veteran frontiersman had merely acted on instinct. Two hundred feet range with a buffalo gun and his target

lined against a glowing fire was easy pickings for the old trapper.

The mystery that aroused the emigrants was however, why Cleyton should have tried to murder Torrand. Torrand himself could offer no reason, no motive. He'd hardly known the man; only met him with the train at Bull Creek.

It was a closed incident to most, but it left its print on the impressionable men and women. They buried Cleyton before dawn beside the trail. There were many such graves all along the route from the Missouri to Fort Laramie.

"Cholera victims" these graves had been pointed out. "Died like flies in '51 an' again last season."

There were numerous views on why Cleyton had wanted to kill Torrand. Most declared that it was over a girl in the train. This rumor at last reached the ears of Peter Sharpe, who on several occasions, had noticed Torrand riding beside the Benning wagon. Sharpe wondered now if Torrand had furnished the germ for this rumor, to throw suspicion away from him or to arouse interest or sympathy in him. A woman's sympathy. He'd heard of such things.

Sharpe was riding lazily beside Captain Matt. He mentioned this.

"Them two," said Captain Matt, "was standin' together most o' last evenin'. Saw 'em myself by Newton's fire. An' George Flynn saw 'em too, 'cause I 'member he said to me, pointin' to Torrand; 'I still don't cotton to the feller, Captain.' They was talkin' half the night like a coupla old school chums. Mighty strange. Think we should oughta camp at Ash Hollow 'r just collect wood there an' keep rollin' till sunset?"

Peter Sharpe looked at the sky, swung about in his saddle and studied the movement of the train behind them. "I'm for coverin' ground in daylight. Been seein' some few signs here an' there. Can't make out what tribe they are, but it ain't that Pawnee bunch that camped at the Forks. I'd rather get past the Hollow if the teams can make it."

"Well, yes, that's so. We'll keep 'em rollin'. Wood's gettin' bad scarce, Peter. Yuh notice? An' a party's gotta circle forty mile to find buffler chips any more. This keeps up, a feller'll have to start out from Independence with his wood supply. Everything's damn near cut down now."

The train rolled steadily onward. It was gradually leaving the prairie region for the actual plains country. They were beginning to climb. By late afternoon they reached Ash Hollow and the leaders detailed a dozen men to gather firewood and pack it on the lighter wagons. Torrand was one of those sent for wood.

"Why such unnecessary labor?" he demanded. "Why aren't we camping here instead of carrying wood beyond? I object. What this train needs is some organization, somebody—", he paused, glaring angrily at Old Captain Matt who sidled up to him. "Anybody but old Buzzard Bait here—"

Captain Matt spat a thick brown stream of tobacco juice full in Torrand's face and walked away while the frenzied "planter" mopped his face. He did not see the tear-filled eyes, or the quick grab that Torrand made for his pistol. Three or four men leaped toward him and snatched the weapon from the fellow's hand.

Torrand swore vividly. "If you were a younger man, Skelton," he fairly shouted, "I'd tear you apart with my two hands."

"You ain't goin' to be disappointed, Torrand," a voice answered him promptly, and into the group stepped Peter Sharpe, leaving his horse tied to a stone. "I'm younger an' I'm curious to learn whether you're a real bad man 'r just a cussed nuisance. Besides you look more like one o' them river gamblers they tell about than any Southern gentleman I ever met. What'll it be, knives, pistols 'r rifles? How about two nice keen axes?"

The lead wagons had stopped and the train was piling up. Excited men and women came running forward. Frank Woodward attempted to smooth things over, pleading with Torrand to go back and forget it, and for Captain Matt to get the train moving.

But the thing had gone too far. Sharpe shoved Woodward away.

"Wait a minute, friend," he commanded, waving the crowd back to form a sort of circle in which he and Torrand faced each other. "You have been kickin' up a stink over one thing an' another, more'n anybody else in this party. Twice in a week you raised hell because we camped instead o' racin' on an' killin' our teams. Now,

I come up in time to learn that *you've decided* to camp at Ash Hollow when we want to keep movin'."

Robert Torrand kept his slitted frown fixed on Sharpe but made no answer, no move. He seemed to be gripped by the spell of the scout's unwavering grey eyes. Sharpe went on.

"Last night a man was shot to death to save yore life. You ain't been able yet to give any of us a satisfactory reason for his wantin' to kill you. And, worse still, you've been damn fool enough to lie about me to a lady in this party; a lady too fine fer either of us to hold her hoss."

"Damn you, Sharpe," bellowed Torrand, moving a step nearer. "You keep the lady's name out of this or I'll—"

"Draw!" snapped Peter Sharpe, freezing stiffly. "I've seen enough o' you right now to last me a lifetime, but before we make gunsmoke you'll get yore chance to tell that lady you lied; that I'm not married to no squaw down in Pueblo, nor to any other woman, anywhere."

Tense, his face flushed with anger, his ears tingling with the sibilant whisperings of the crowd, Torrand made as if to turn away. There was an audible murmur from the spectators, men in homespun and leather, women in calico and jean. Swift as light Torrand whirled about and whipped out his pistol.

SHRILL warnings filled the air. It was but an instant, the batting of an eye. A girl's voice screamed. "Oh, Peter—!"

Even as he leaped, Sharpe knew he had recognized that voice. His heavy boot rose like a chunk of blasted rock and his toe struck Torrand's forearm with a crack like the splitting of wood. Calm control guided the scout's hard right first as he smashed it over Torrand's eye. The planter stumbled backward, a curse on his lips, caught himself and charged forward. The pistol had been dashed from his fist, but Torrand, as he flung himself at his foe, tore at his boot-top reaching for a long blade hidden there.

"Watch him, Sharpe!" cried Woodward. "The man's gone mad!"

"Look out for a knife, Peter!" warned Old Captain Matt.

The scout heard and met Torrand's rush with his full weight. His bronzed left hand clamped the knife hand wrist and, locked together thus, they fought and struggled right and left, forward, backward, panting like a pair of buck elks locked in a death struggle. Torrand, his weapon useless, refused to let it drop. He swung viciously with his free left, while Sharpe hammered him, head and body, with his right. A minute, crowded with battering blows, they fought, Torrand cursing brokenly through his now bleeding lips, until Sharpe leaped suddenly to his right, jerking Torrand's wrist, flinging the man off balance.

With a trick that he had learned from the savages, Peter snapped Torrand's arm backward. There was a yell of pain. The knife slipped from the fingers. Sharpe seized Torrand with both hands, shook him upright, and with a right smash to the jaw knocked the man flat at the very feet of Old Captain Matt.

"Bind him," ordered Woodward with a gesture, "lash him on his horse and appoint a guard over him, George. We'll try this man when we make camp. Forward!" He raised his voice in a shout and signalled for the continued march.

SIX of the older men of the party were selected that evening in camp along a creek bank to act as a jury to try Robert Torrand. The six, since Woodward, as train leader, refused to act, comprised Amos Benning, Caleb Newton, Leon Tagnon, William Kearns, "Big Fred" Miller and Thomas Wanchette.

The jury knew to a man that there was nothing they could do with Torrand, for he had killed no one, stolen nothing, nor had he annoyed any of the women. Newton, as foreman, sent for the prisoner.

Torrand was ushered before them by George Flynn, who removed the ropes from his wrists. Torrand glared about him defiantly. Old Captain Matt sat on a stump nearby sharpening a butcherknife on a stone.

Newton, anxious to get it over with quickly, wasted no words.

"Torrand," he said sternly, "we've decided to give you one more chance to make yourself agreeable on this trip. Your offense is more of a general annoyance than an actual crime. If you'll promise to stop making trouble among us, we'll release you,

reinstate you to your original standing. Otherwise, for the safety of the party, we'll have to ask you to take your nigger an' your wagon and strike out for yourself."

Surprising enough, Torrand did not flare up. For reasons strictly and fiendishly personal with himself he nodded soberly. He wet his lips with his tongue and appeared properly chastened.

"Very clear," he agreed. "You try me here in the wilderness and I am given no chance to defend myself, to tell my side."

"Hold on a minute," cut in Big Fred Miller whose voice was thunder itself, "We all know the whole story. We been fair to you, mister. You can take your stuff an' go if you want. What we demand now is your word."

"I see," replied Torrand, nodding. "Well, I'll stick along with the train an' try to make the best of it."

Thus was Torrand warned, and for some days, as the party followed the winding course of the North Platte between the Forks and Fort Laramie, the dark-eyed man from "Louisiana" bothered no one. Instead, he extended himself in his elaborate Southern courtesy, wormed his way cleverly back into the good graces of Beth Benning, who was peculiarly fascinated by his polish and devil-may-care manner. He tried to make friends with almost everyone in the party except Captain Matt and Peter Sharpe. These two ignored him.

In due time the train passed the now famed Court House Rock where the trail forked with what traders called the "Ridge Route." On and on they marched, the families from the East thrilling to the sight of Chimney Rock, then the startling phenomenon called Scott's Bluffs. Here the wagon train commenced to enjoy an occasional feast of meat. Peter Sharpe, with a couple of experienced rifle shots, left the party every day or so on meat hunting expeditions, returning to camp with a stray buffalo, a pair of antelopes or bear. Game was still scarce in this region for the Indians some years ago had run most of the wild creatures farther back into the fastness of the Rockies. But Sharpe knew the game trails and, while there were no more great herds, such as the earlier trappers had encountered, he did bring in meat enough to vary the monotony of salt pork.

ON the fourth of July, as the train emerged from Marshall Pass into another sweeping stretch of undulating plains, there was great alarm among the party for there directly before them was a large band of Indians. The men snatched up their weapons and hid women and children in the wagons. Woodward was about to shout to "fort up" but Peter Sharpe waved his hand.

"Don't let them see any sign that we fear 'em," he called calmly. "Keep the train moving slowly." And he rode forward. Anxious eyes from the train watched him. They saw Sharpe ride up to a tall feathered savage, his right hand raised, palm forward. The Indian chief did the same. A number of yapping dogs surrounded Sharpe's horse. A half dozen braves began to form a circle about him. "Keep the train rollin'," ordered Captain Matt, riding with Woodward. "That's old Many Elk, chief of the 'Rapahoes. They're off their range, but Peter an' the ol' dog eater are good friends. Long time ago Sharpe killed a Ute an' saved Many Elk's life."

Captain Matt swung away to join Sharpe with the Indians. The train moved along. The emigrants saw for the first time a real Indian tribe on the march. Horse and even dog travois were packed with blanket and hide bundles; old men and women, like parched and ancient mummies, were being transported in this fashion.

The wagon train was some two miles beyond before Sharp and Old Matt shook hands with Many Elk and promised to visit his camp on their return trip. They saw the Indians on their way and put spurs to their own mounts, rejoining the train.

That night, under a sky of wind-driven fleece and a glitter of cool stars, this strange Peter Sharpe at last allowed some of the awed emigrants to witness the marksmanship which had earned him the nick-name of Dead-shot. Night after night, from their blankets, they had heard the weird, unearthly howl of the skulking timber wolves. But never a sight of one did they get. Tonight, attracted by hunger and the scent of meat, a great gaunt shadow crept close to the circle of wagons.

Around a fire, in a group, sat the Newtons, Bennings and Woodward families.

Peter Sharpe and Old Matt hunkered at the edge, smoking.

Suddenly the young scout froze. Quietly he spoke. "Don't anybody move 'r get alarmed; I'm shootin'." His heavy dragoon Colt was in his hand as if by magic. Heads turned to see. Two phosphorescent balls of light, reflected by the fire, gleamed against the prairie blackness.

Sharpe fired through a triangle of wagon spokes, and Old Matt arose, picked his way between wagons and returned to the fire dragging the huge carcass of a fierce grey wolf. It had been killed with the single shot, dead center between the eyes.

"Whew!" whistled Newton. "That's what I call a dead shot!"

THE following day, late in the afternoon and true to Sharpe's prophecy, the train with its creaking wagons, bellowing oxen and braying mules, came in sight of Fort Laramie. Amid feverish excitement and a bedlam of cheering the train plunged into the Platte, while on the opposite shore the weary emigrants could see the gates of the stockade swing open. Army bugles blew, and a dozen soldiers on dashing horses raced down to the water's edge to meet them.

Grizzled mountain men, trappers, traders, breeds, colorful French-Canadian voyageurs, a scattering of Indian bucks and fat waddling squaws poured out to stare curiously at the party. "Hyah, Dead-Shot!" came the cry from the bearded lips of a lean trapper. "Where's Ol' Cap'n Bones?" Sharpe waved greeting and shouted. "Bringin' up the rear."

Major Harner, commanding the Mounted Rifles that garrisoned the old fur trading post, came out to welcome them. Sharpe shook his hand, asked for news of the trail ahead. All about was a mingling of shouts, bawling animals. Six hundred and sixty-seven miles they had come, barely a third of their journey to California.

The wagons were drawn up systematically close by the fort gate. Captain Matt directed the herding of the stock with guards posted. Already the men and women were rushing toward the gate, clutching children by the hand, shrinking timidly through the crowd of buckskin clad frontiersmen and blanket-robed redskins. Around a sort of cat-walk inside the seven-foot thick walls, sentinels with rifles at shoulder stood on guard, watching the plain and mountain.

Peter Sharpe, with Old Matt and several of their own men were grouped with Major Harner and his staff, exchanging trail news, reports of the Indian situation, weather and gossip of the East. He observed Torrand sauntering past, grim, silent, apparently searching for a face. Sharpe guessed he was seeking the Bennings. And then he heard a voice that he recognized. It was old "Rolling" Stone, a trader whom he had known for years.

Torrand was within four feet of Stone, when the old trader saw him, and stared curiously a moment. Then he lifted a hairy hand in a kind of salute, rather than greeting.

"By damn! Delaine!" ejaculated Stone. "'r are ye a walkin' spook?"

The man known as Torrand on the overland journey started as if he had been jerked by a rope. He glanced at the trader, stammered, and quickly assumed an air of disturbed dignity.

"Hello, stranger," he replied, then, "You've made a mistake, I'm sure. I must resemble some friend of yours, eh? They say every man has his double." And he laughed lightly, turned to go on.

But old gimlet-eyed Rolling Stone was not to be confused. Sharpe saw him put out a hand, detaining Torrand. And he heard: "Man, we don't ask no questions out in this country, but you can't run no blazer on old Eagle Eye here. I was in St. Louie with a shipment o' furs the night you shot yore way outa town through that posse. And I knew yuh. . . ."

The man who posed as a Louisiana planter quickly drew Stone away toward the center of the bustling square, busily plying him with words, so that Peter Sharpe could not catch the balance of the conversation. But before the occupants of Fort Laramie rolled in their blankets for the night Sharpe located Stone and learned the truth about Torrand.

"Sure," vouchsafed the trader. "For years he rode the outlaw trail up an' down the Mississippi. Name's Delaine. They called him Tennessee Bob. Why I've seen reward notices at a dozen landings, describin' him. Time I went down river four year ago come September. An' I saw this gent with a smokin' gun in his paw in

St. Louie the night he murdered an' robbed the merchant. Yuh had no knowledge, eh?"

"None," admitted Sharpe. "But a few suspicions. I'm obliged to yuh, Rollin'."

Late in the night, while every other emigrant of the party lay sleeping soundly for the first time in almost forty days secure in the thickness of the walls surrounding them, Peter Sharpe and nine executives of the Woodward Train met in secret conclave in Major Harner's private quarters. Here Sharpe explained what he had learned from Stone, the trader, about "Tennessee Bob" Torrand-Delaine.

"There ain't no God n'r Law west o' the Missouri," grinned Old Matt. "Ye can't put a finger on the hombre nohow."

Sharpe rubbed a brown capable hand across his set jaw. "No good will come of this man," he declared sternly. He shook his head and his grey eyes blazed. "The first time he breaks trail rule," swore Sharpe solemly, "I'll take the law in my own hands."

REVEILLE awakened the post at dawn and the emigrants rubbed their eyes in a veritable hive of activity. After breakfast, they watched, fascinated, as a narrow-hipped bugler sounded "Stables" and the soldiers hurried to morning duty. The small boys in the train thrilled as the shrill brass notes rocketed skyward to reverberate across the surrounding hills.

"Oh go to the stable
An' work while yer able,
An' give the pore hosses
Some water an' hay.

"Oh if yuh don't do it
The sergeant will know it,
An' put yuh in the guardhouse
An' that, right away!"

Reveille, Stables, Boots an' Saddles, Non-Commissioned Officer's Call. The Woodward party was at work as quickly as the garrison, changing guard over stock, checking the contents of their wagons and the repairing of the wagons. The women, under the keen eyes of the soldiers on post, had a wash day at the river's edge.

The blare of the bugle, calling of sentries caused a concerted rush toward the fort gate.

The cause for the new excitement arrived in the shape of a pack train and a party of army officers accompanied by scouts. The chief of these, as the dusty troop marched in, was quickly identified.

"Kit Carson!" A shout rose like an explosion. The famed frontiersman, a rather short, slight, but wiry man, garbed in fringed buckskin and moccasins and riding stirrup to stirrup with Colonel Bradley, waved his hand and grunted. His grin was like that of a boy, as he surveyed the Woodward party and its outfit. Then his twinkling eyes caught sight of a tall figure in buckskin, arm about the shoulder of a familiar, bearded old-timer. Carson called out.

"Hyah, Peter Sharpe! Matt Skelton, you old grave cheater, you!"

Major Harner saluted Colonel Bradley, and there were slaps on the back, handshaking. Harner suggested retiring at once to wet down the trail dust. From Kit Carson, Sharpe and Skelton learned that the party had just come through from Fort Bridger, and that Jim Bridger himself had gone north to Soda Springs. Sharpe was especially anxious to learn if there were any threats of redskins along the trail.

"Nothin' in war paint," said Carson. "Passed a small band o' Sioux on a hunting trip. 'peared to me like they was some o' Red Cloud's braves. After buffalo."

"Good," nodded Sharpe with relief. "Then we can start off in the morning, can't we, Captain Matt?"

Skelton agreed, and inquired of news about Sante Fe, knowing that Kit Carson had come through there only a few months back. Carson shortly was called by Colonel Bradley and left his old friends to their work of preparing the wagon train for the march in the morning.

SO busy were the leaders in getting the train across the Platte at the ford early the next day, that Sharpe scarcely noticed the man now known confusingly as Torrand and Delaine. But Delaine, as the members of that party would ever afterward remember him, rode his black horse among the cheering, shouting men and women who looked once more westward. Behind them the soldiers waved. Kit Carson shook Peter Sharpe's hand grimly and wished him luck.

"Stretch out!" bellowed Captain Matt as the last of the train crawled dripping from the ford. Four abreast the wagons rolled now, their next water at Big Spring. Eyes were eagerly scanning this wild new country. The Black Hills, some called it; others the foothills of the Bighorns. But to all it was the road to California.

Up with the leaders, and not far behind the mounts of Sharpe and Skelton, rode Delaine, brazenly, with an air of gayety. He was well pleased with himself. Only one thing troubled him. There was that Benning girl. He had seen her twice, the day before, in earnest conversation with the scout, Sharpe. Once, he was sure, he had heard her call him "Peter." She seemed interested in the wild man, even inquiring what he intended doing with himself when they reached California.

Delaine intended to have the girl himself, but how to save the girl and massacre every other man, woman and child, was the problem.

"What is it?" he suddenly heard Woodward call out. Peter Sharpe was riding swiftly ahead. They could not be far from Big Spring.

"Looks like a small buffler herd," answered Old Matt. "Peter is goin' for'ard to make sure."

The word spread rapidly down through the train. Herd of buffalo ahead. All eyes were following the fast riding scout. Sharpe was seen to halt his horse, shading his eyes with a hand. In a flash he was coming swiftly back. "Buffalo!" he confirmed as he slid his horse to a stop and gestured ahead, to the right of the trail. "We'll go along, Matt, but I suggest that word be passed back that none of our men get an itching trigger finger. This may be a herd that the Sioux are driving north for their winter meat supply. We don't want any trouble with Red Cloud's scalpin' fools."

Delaine heard and pushed his mount forward, examining his weapons. As the wagons continued on the whole party became tense, straining with unaccustomed eyes to make out the buffalo. Still others rode nervously, listening, startled by snapping twigs and the rustling of the trees and brush. At last, with a slight turn of the trail, they beheld the dark beasts, the huge bulls snorting as the wind brought them the scent.

Sharpe motioned to the men of the party. "See the way the herd is actin'?" he said. "This is only part of a big herd. You can see 'em blowin' from here. They been drivin'. Don't dare fire a shot into 'em 'r we'll have a heap o' hell on our hands." Repeating this caution the scout rode rapidly down the line of wagons, warning all men and boys against shooting into the herd.

No man was prepared for the sudden move of Delaine. With an angry shout he spured his horse forward. "I'll shoot buffalo any time I damn please!" he flung back. Away he went. Captain Matt shouted and drew his pistol, shook his head, yelled for Sharpe. "Let him go," cried the scout. "It'll be the end o' him, I hope. Every man be on his guard now."

In less than a minute the wilderness was a terror ridden, bloody battlefield. They heard Delaine's opening shots. A big bull was downed. The herd bellowed and tails went up; mad flight followed. And from the surrounding forest broke the fierce, blood-curdling war-cry of the savages. The booming of rifles, crack of pistols, the soft, whispering hiss of flying arrows.

"Shoot cool and steady," shouted Sharpe, "Matt, get the train headed back for the fort. Cut the traces of those dead oxen." He was everywhere firing, directing the difficult turning of the teams. Horses fell. The air was filled with a bedlam of terrifying sound, savage yells, the thud and crash of bullets and arrows, the screams of wounded beasts and stricken men. Women clutched their children, swinging clubs and pick handles, as the crimson horde poured from the brush and trees.

Wagons were abandoned, teams cut loose. The flight was a mad one, with women lashing frenzied animals back along the trail, the men resisting stubbornly, shooting from saddle and afoot.

A mile they raced, two miles, holding off the pursuing savages. The Sioux dodged from tree to rock, hounding every step, until a voice rose hysterically from one of the forward wagons. "Soldiers!" Sharpe and Skelton, bloody, and eyes filled with sweat, heard the thunder of the hard-ridden horses from Fort Laramie. They'd

heard the sounds of the battle far away. On they came, the bugle echoing the command to "Charge."

It was a fight that none of the survivors will ever forget. The soldiers, many of them sharpshooters, reinforced the brave scouts and the men of the train. Back to Fort Laramie they retreated, a ragged, straggling route, with the Sioux hot on their heels, almost to the very gate of the fort.

There they counted heads. Amos Benning, an arm torn by an arrow-head and bound by a bandana, stood in the center of the forlorn party, his face raised to the heavens thanking the Lord for the preservation of his wife and daughter. Other men had not been so fortunate; nor had other women. Seven men and two women would not answer roll call at the end of the California Trail.

"Newton died in the first volley," said Old Matt sadly as Leon Tagnon came up and informed the group: "That man, Delaine or Torrand, he is still with us. Must be charmed. Lost a hunk of one ear, is all."

Peter Sharpe swore luridly and rubbed his powder-blackened hands. As soon as the Sioux were chased back he would settle with Delaine personally. And the settlement would be final.

VI

THE night was a sleepless one for the occupants of Fort Laramie. A double guard was posted. As the hours passed the cry of the sentinels was heard: "Nine o'clock and Injuns camped on hill." The sergeant of the guard made continuous rounds, field glass in hand. Indian fires were burning on all hills surrounding the fort.

Major Harner called a council. Colonel Bradley and Kit Carson with their light pack train had left the post promptly after the Woodward party and had headed east. Unlikely that they had even heard the gunfire.

"Looks bad, Major," ventured Peter Sharpe.

"Very," agreed the officer. "The party I sent out to parley with the chiefs found it was a renegade sub-chief called Standing Brown Bear a Brule. There's Brules, Cheyennes and Crows. They want blood."

"Never heard of Brown Bear among the Brule Sioux," said the scout.

"Nor did I," said Harner, "but he's surrounded us and sends word that we're to evacuate the fort so he can destroy it. Promises all of us safe conduct east to within sight of Fort Kearney."

"You don't believe that?" demanded Sharpe, who in that instant saw a vivid picture of the beautiful Beth Benning's golden locks dangling from a Sioux lance.

"Certainly not," the Major assured his listeners. "Some might escape but the rest of us would be massacred." He shook his head. "Woodward tells me that many of your supplies and much ammunition was lost with the wagons you were forced to abandon in flight. This makes our position doubly hard. We can't hold out very long on our rations and all we've got is plenty of water."

"Which means . . .?" Amos Benning left the question hanging with an obvious insinuation.

In the brief pause the night wind was suddenly laden with the war chants of the savages dancing around their fires on the hills. The men looked at each other with grim concern.

"We'll hold out as long as we can," stated the major. "Maybe our quarterly ration supply train will come through. If we can hold—well, suppose we see what tomorrow brings. I'll post a double guard tonight."

Few, however, slept that night. There were the wounded to care for, the checking of weapons. Morning came. The first rays of the sun on the hills showed the watchers that Standing Brown Bear was well supported by a painted army of devils, waving defiance from all sides.

AS the day wore on Major Harner moved about from group to group, chatting with the men and women, assuring the latter than no savage had ever scaled the walls.

The old-timers, however, those veteran mountain men, the traders and trappers, fellows like Old Matt and Peter Sharpe were not impressed; they knew Indians.

"The longer we wait," said Rolling Stone between puffs of his pipe, "the worse off we'll be. I'm fer sashayin' out there

an' makin' a fight of it. A man's gotta die sometime, ain't he Matt?"

Skelton shrugged. "Sure, Rollin'." Then seriously, "Even if the ration train did come, them hootin' sons on them hills 'd get the jump on 'em. An' they ain't enough to stand 'em off in the open. It's gotta be a regiment 'r a army to drive these varmints off now."

"Or a trick," put in Sharpe. "Grass is too green to burn 'em out. If some of us could get out, get around behind 'em—"

This was a thought that Major Harner nourished. If they could get a courier through. But the major had only a small force. Every man counted.

"I'd have to call for a volunteer," he decided. "No officer can order an enlisted man to ride out into almost certain death like this. Chances of getting through are pretty slim."

A shot from the west wall startled the garrison. A sergeant hurried to the spot and several men snatched up their rifles. An Indian brave had tried to sneak up on the wagons just outside the wall, a brand in his hand to set off a fire. They heard the sergeant compliment the soldier on his shooting. A Cheyenne buck was sprawled midway between the trees and the wagons.

The incident alarmed the women of the party, but nothing more interrupted the afternoon. A few desultory flaming arrows were seen arcing from the hills. These fell so far short of the fort that they only enraged the redskins and brought shouts of ridicule from the soldiers.

As the sun began casting long shadows across the mountains and the Indians were silhouetted in its golden orange blaze, there were grave faces scanning the deep purple haze of the slopes and valleys. Sentinels probed the blue-green shadows of the trees, the river banks where the setting sun touched the waters turning them into streams of molten fire. That the savages were lurking behind every clump and bush there was no doubt, but not a feather showed.

The light within the walls of Fort Laramie was fast fading. The saddened overland party sat about in groups, or walked nervously back and forth, helplessly, dread fear etched in new lines on their faces.

Major Harner appeared, walking to the center of the parade. He was a tall, square shouldered man, square jawed, lean bodied. Beside him marched his orderly, a rusty haired private with freckled face, and longhorn mustache. Within two minutes from his halting in the center of the drill ground, his entire garrison—except those men on guard—were standing in stiff formation before him. Emigrants, traders, trappers, some few Pawnee bucks and squaws who were in the fort when the attack started, were drawing close about the officer and his men. Peter Sharpe and Old Matt suspected the reason for the formation. Sharpe stood near the Bennings, peculiarly tingling as he felt the eyes of the blonde Beth upon him. He saw Delaine, too, lurking in the background, apparently in earnest council with some of the drivers and mechanics of the train.

"At ease, men," began the major. The men grunted; the stiffness went out of their backs. The officer spoke quietly, without excitement. They must secure help, reinforcements. He inquired if any of the men knew the trail to Fort Kearney. Every hand was raised. Then, "Very well. I'm calling for a volunteer to try to get through to Kearney. Remember—no man is ordered to take this risk. Whoever rides has small chance reaching Kearney, but somebody must go. Who'll volunteer? Steady there. Those who want to offer, will take two steps forward, on command."

There was a thickening of the silence, a tenseness that seemed to fill the broad area within the walls. The soldiers sucked in their bellies, eyes on their major. He snapped: "Compan-ay . . . Ten-shun! . . . Volunteers . . . Forward . . . Hotch!" Straight as the rigid line of the fort wall, unbroken, the extended company front stepped out. One! Two! "Comp'ny . . . Hut!"

A wild cheer rose from the throats of the women and men; a cheer that leaped from throats constricted in the tenseness of the occasion. Not a soldier had stood fast, not one but who stepped forward, ready, with his life.

MAJOR HARNER gulped, unashamed, and rubbed at his eye and his nose. A hard, almost savage smile framed his eyes as he ran his gaze down the line. Pride beamed in his face. "I knew it," he said. For a moment he was

silent, thoughtful. "I've got to pick one, anyway, huh? Well, Farrell, you red-headed Mick; you're a single man. If you get through you can have a month's leave in Independence. And thank you, men, all of you. I'm really proud." To Private Mickey Farrell he said: "You take your pick of a horse, Mickey. Get ready to break out of the gate as night falls. Company dismissed."

Followed then a scene that was to become almost a custom in Frontier posts in the western wilderness. Farrell, the lucky dog, as his soldier mates called him, was rushed off to quarters by his friends. There, one by one, they pressed him for his personal belongings.

"Them new boots, Mick," coaxed a bunkie. "I get 'em don't I—if yuh—don't get back?"

"Sure, Jack," replied Mick, busy with his preparations. And so were all of his possessions, he would leave behind, disposed of. In case he didn't come back.

Outside near Major Harner's quarters another scene was taking place. Peter Sharpe, who had been talking earnestly with Old Matt, beckoned Harner. Farrell's chances were slim, they all knew. But wouldn't the soldier stand a better show if a mounted man were to dash out of Fort Laramie and make a run westward?

"Might draw the Injuns off," said Sharpe hopefully. "Put a man on a good horse, station sharpshooters to cover his start a little, and let him ride like hell toward Fort Bridger." The Sioux might take the bait and be fooled into chasing him. This would give Farrell a better chance to get through in the opposite direction. "What do you think, Major?"

"Good idea, but it's just sacrificing another man. And where would he go if he got through?"

"I've thought it all out," declared Sharpe. "I've talked with Captain Skelton. A man who knows all the trails west of here has a half chance."

"But I haven't got a man in the garrison experienced enough."

"But you have," retorted Sharpe. "I'm the man. All I'm asking is one of your oat-fed cayuses. I'll get these renegade war-whoops out of these hills if I get loose. And I'd like to start pronto."

The officer grasped Sharpe's hand and gripped it warmly. Any horse in the stables; in fact, he could have the major's personal mount, a powerful, long-legged stayer. Sharpe nodded and went off to get ready.

The news quickly spread. Sharp, the scout, was going to ride decoy; same as going out there to certain death. In a deep shadow beneath the walls Delaine lounged on his blankets with six hard looking characters. With these frontier guerrillas he would at last settle his score—if they came out of this alive. And with Peter Sharpe removed. Delaine grinned as the rumor reached him.

"Sharpe riding, eh? Well, that makes it easier for me. There he comes now. Another one out of my way. You see, gentlemen, Lady Luck is my pardner. You fellows stick with me and we'll show California a thing or two."

It was still light enough for the Indians on the hill tops to see a man ride out of the fort. Peter Sharpe, leading Major Harner's big black, crossed the parade toward the gate. Harner walked beside him. Old Matt, his eyes on the ground, walked behind Sharpe silently. There was a concerted rush of emigrants toward the scout, grasping his hand, begging him to stay. Some were crying, pleading; others prayed.

Mickey Farrell, booted and spurred, his blue eyes smiling, left his chosen mount at the stables and came forward, hard hand outstretched.

"Scout," he said grimly, "as one Irisher to a Yankee I may be owin' me life to yuh. Here's luck. S'long."

"Adios, Farrell," nodded Sharpe to the red headed trooper. "Don't sell yore hair too cheap. Good luck."

Sharpe, suddenly aware that he was the cynosure of a deep circle of anxious eyes, turned from the soldier and gestured, a sort of sweeping motion of his buckskin-gloved hand; "Hold the fort, friends," he said smiling, and found himself looking for Delaine. He'd forgotten the man until now. Old Matt touched his arm. "He's over by the wall, Peter," he said. "I'll see to him, but—there's a gal, yonder, wants to tell ye adios." Sharpe caught sight of Beth Benning over Matt's shoulder and reached out a hand.

She took it timidly. Then impulsively she clutched at his arm with her other hand and looked up into his face. There were unchecked tears in her large blue eyes. Peter was mumbling a confusion of words intended to calm her fears when she cried out: "Peter—Sharpe! You were riding away without saying goodbye. If anything should happen to you it would break my—our hearts. Here, let me give you a token." She quickly unfastened a small golden chain and cross from her throat and threw her arms up to link it about his own brown neck. "Wear it and God will watch over you."

The young scout swallowed, fumbled with his hat, and, with the complete approval of the crowd, grabbed Beth Benning in his arms and kissed her full on the mouth. "Good bye, Beth!" Color flooded his tanned face and his eyes flamed in the light of the sunset glow. Leaping lightly into the saddle, he felt of his weapons, waved a signal and the soldiers swung open one of the gates.

THERE was a mighty yell rose from the watching redskins on the hills. Peter Sharpe dashed out through the fort gate, swinging westward toward a gap in the Big Horn range. The speed of the big charger flung sparks. A thunderous cheer broke spontaneously from the beleaguered garrison, as down the hillsides poured the crimson-painted horde.

From the fort walls sharpshooters opened fire, knocking the nearest of the savages from racing ponies. The scout, riding like the very wind, was making for a narrow gorge in the shadowy mass before him. As he faded from view, still riding and apparently unscathed, the gate was closed. Amid the rattling fire of the riflemen on the walls, the women, Beth Benning among them, dropped to their knees, hands clasped and faces lifted to the sky. Please God, carry this brave young man through unharmed!

Darkness soon fell, blotting out the Rockies. The sound of shooting was deadened by distance and the sentries reported that many savages had joined the race to cut off the scout.

Farrell mounted his horse and approached the gate. Major Harner clasped his hand, suggested that he strike the Mormon Trail which followed the north bank of the Platte. "Don't make for the ford here," he cautioned. "Swimming the river will slow you up and give the Indians the jump on you. Cover ground, Mickey. Don't waste ammunition. Ride!"

"So long, soldier," came the barely audible goodbyes from his bunkies and the civilians. "Luck!"

This time the gate was eased open just enough to permit man and horse to wedge through. Darkness was deepening. Stars were not yet bright. Private Mickey Farrell, his horse's hoofs padded with thick buffalo hide, hair side in, guided his mount carefully toward the East. If he was alive three miles from the fort he would remove those pads and hit the wind.

Behind the darkened walls of the fort many ears were cupped to listen. Only the cool night wind brushed the top of the wall and whipped the halyard hanging from the flag-pole.

PAINTED, feathered yelling hellions were closing in on him from all sides like a swarm of buzzing hornets, but Peter Sharpe crouched low in his saddle, his main concern the guiding of his splendid horse.

"Headway first you flyin' bronc," cheered the scout, his eyes alert to the rough ground they were pounding in the darkness. "We'll head 'em an' then argue." His big Colts pistol was in his right fist but he held his fire. Bullets and arrows flew thick and fast as the savages, maddened by the swiftness of the lone white man's horse, tried to bring him down.

First on one side, then the other, Sharpe slid down Indian fashion along the animal's neck, urging the beast to greater speed, guiding him between rocks, between clumps of trees and brush, leaping tiny creek beds. The little Indian ponies were being outrun in this wild dash for safety and the frenzied savages sensing the scout's escape were shooting now at the big black horse. Sharpe heard the scream and whistle of the leaden slugs as they tore past and above him.

Through a gap in the hills he broke out into a broad stretch of rolling plain, covered with clumps of buffalo grass. His pursuers were thinning out but those still clinging to his tail were converging on him

from angles at right and left. Sharp took a quick look over his shoulder.

"Too close," he muttered to his horse as he spied a shadowy Sioux drawing nearer. He lifted his pistol and fired. He saw the Indian's arms flung upward; and red man slid from his horse, coughing. And as he turned, Sharpe felt the red-hot slash of an arrow tearing through his hip. He clutched at the place, tightened his grip on his reins.

Blood smeared his glove. The bite of the wound was agonizing, but he could find no arrow, even piece of the shaft.

He gasped. "Hoss, that one was jus' almost," he mumbled. "Jus' cut the skin an' lucky fer us." His breeches were slashed along his hip but he clung grimly to his seat and began shooting in earnest now.

Emptying his pistol and feeling certain that he had unhorsed at least four of the Indians, he drew his rifle and gripped it ready. Ahead of him in the darkening night he knew where a forest trail opened.

"If I can make that," he panted, ducking suddenly with a yell as his hat was shot from his head, "I'll make these scavengers fall into single file. There ain't room any other way."

And at that instant, against the black shadows of the forest wall, he discovered a warrior quirting like a fiend—aiming for the same point to head him off. Peter Sharpe, hatless, sweat streaming from his face, his hair whipping in the speed of his flight, knew he was as close to death as he had ever been. The Sioux would beat him to the trail that ran for miles like a deep dark tunnel through the forest clad slopes of the Big Horns.

Thoughts crowded Sharpe's brain as he strained his eyes, lifting the rifle and spurring the brave animal under him. Another burst of speed from the now foaming horse —or a misstep, a fall—and the end in a hand-to-hand, one sided fight. Swift as the thundering hoofs of his horse, he saw strange pictures, flashing and gone in an instant like the flame from the gun muzzles aimed at him by the Indians; he saw his gentle mother standing in the dooryard of his little home back in the East; his father at the plow waving to him from the fields; and he saw in a radiant aura, framed in a setting like the blaze of a rising sun—Beth Benning and her tearful but brave eyes.

Peter Sharpe shook the strange feeling off and raised his rifle, took quick aim and fired. The night shuddered with the boom of the buffalo gun. He saw in the vague half light, the warrior crumple and go spinning from the racing pony. And, with a shrill yell of defiance at his pursuers, he swung his heaving mount straight at the darker opening in the forest wall.

HE knew in that instant that he would live or die by the simple grace of his maker—or the downright gameness of his horse.

Behind him the bloodthirsty painted horde crowded the narrow tree lined entrance to the trail. Utter blackness engulfed him but he dug in his spurs, recklessly. No time to reload the rifle. One pistol empty. He had one Colts left and his knife.

"Here goes, ol' charger!" he said to the horse, dragging out the heavy dragoon and flinging two quick shots straight back behind him. "If we can tumble 'em in a heap there we'll slow 'em up plenty." He heard the cries of a dying horse and the wild yell of a savage stung to death.

On and on he raced. Instinct of man and horse carried them along a narrow path as black as a pit in the bowels of the earth. Twigs and branches lashed and tore at both, and the pounding hoofs thundered like cannon in Sharpe's numbing ears.

How he won through Peter Sharpe never knew. Up and down the winding twisting forest tunnel he rode with straining eyes, sucking his breath through clamped teeth, clinging to his saddle horn. Through sudden, silent creeks he splashed where the quick chill took his breath away. At last, out into the moonlight he burst where the trail hugged a rocky ledge. Out of the tunnel behind him came the maniacal yells of the Sioux far back, but still hounding him, still on his track.

Without a pause, the young scout leaped his horse off the ledge and down. Down, down, like a falling star in the silvery moon gleam; down into the white water flowing beneath. There Sharpe clung to the beast's tail and let the animal drag him, battered and worn, to the opposite bank.

For many moments he stood there dripping, listening. He drew the heaving horse into a clump of trees, and the sting of hot tears came to his eyes as his hand touched the long red gash on the animal's neck. "An' yuh never even whimpered, yuh ol' hero, yuh," Sharpe whispered. Blood was dripping from the horse. Sharpe shook his head desperately, his hand sweeping over the trembling beast. He found other wounds where Indian bullets and arrow heads had driven too close. "He'll never make it—and I'll—" Sharpe lifted his pistol, listened. Far across the river he heard the battering hoofs of the Sioux. A shot would tell them—and as he paused, grim desperation haunting his face, the great horse shuddered and sank to the ground.

Sharpe hunkered down and patted the bloody, frothing muzzle. "Yuh did yore share, ol' bunkie," he whispered hoarsely. "An' I'll do mine. Adios!" Collecting pistol, knife, bullet pouch and powder horn, Peter Sharpe raised his eyes to the sky, took a glance at the stars, made a swift calculation and started away through the forest, running on legs that wabbled. Hour after hour he stumbled forward. The brush tore at his clothes. He fell, arose and staggered on again.

Morning came. Sunrise. At a stream he fell flat and drank. On he staggered, his body numb, his instinct alone bearing him along. Out of the wood he emerged onto the plain, waded another river, climbed steaming up the bank and plodded on. Overhead, unseen, a lone wide winged bird floated lazily along marking his path, dipping swiftly as the scout stumbled, soaring again as he pushed himself half erect.

THE sun was at its zenith when a ragged, battered white man staggered into the creek-side village of that tribe called the Eastern Shoshones. Children and dogs crowded about him as he strove desperately to hold himself erect and walk to the tepee of the famed chief, Washakie. Here Peter Sharpe all but collapsed through the flap.

"Ho, my son," cried Washakie in his own tongue as he recognized the white scout. Squaws quickly fixed a bed of buffalo robes and laid Sharpe gently down. A hot drink swiftly brewed of herbs was poured down his throat, and, while Washakie sat beside him, Peter Sharpe told his story. His white friends were besieged by a renegade band under one who called himself Standing Brown Bear, a Brule Sioux. Would not the great hearted, Washakie, sworn friend of the white father in Washington gather his warriors and drive the outlaw redskins back to their own hunting grounds?

Washakie puffed his pipe, nodding solemnly. He sent a runner through the village summoning his sub-chiefs. Before the sun was set a rousing council ended with cries of "Death to the Standing Brown Bear and his pack of yapping dogs!"

A thousand Shoshone braves, painted and feathered, mounted on their fastest war ponies raced out of the peaceful village with Washakie and Peter Sharpe at their head. It meant a swift ride through the dark, and Washakie assured his white friend.

"The Great Spirit will guide us, my son." And the refreshed scout, riding a pinto pony with a buffalo robe for a saddle, unconsciously put his hand to his throat. The golden cross was there and it reminded him of Beth Benning's last words to him: "God will watch over you."

THE night sky filled with a million stars and the moon came up to tip the ridges all about with silver. In its light one could see from the lookout stations at the fort that Indians still waited. Not so many, perhaps, but they were there, waving defiance. Coyotes howled and owls hooted, and the soldiers swore.

"It's the Injuns," they told the emigrants. "They holler like that signallin' to each other."

Waiting hour after hour, grimly, told on their nerves. What had happened to the scout, Peter Sharpe? Had Private Farrell made through? The graying dawn saw anxious faces watching over the walls. The deathly quiet that frontiersmen fear most in Indian country hung like a pall over the hills. Then—like a bolt of lightning—the fierce din of battle filled the land. Soldiers sprang instantly from their blankets. Major Harner snapped swift commands.

"Injuns!" shouted a sentry. "More Injuns! They're sweepin' like a storm across the hills."

The very mountains seemed to crawl with savages. The boom and crash of guns and the wild yells of the painted riders. Every soldier and civilian, armed to the teeth, was now crouched along the walls. The fight raged bitterly. Old Matt, his keen blue eyes quick to recognize the battle for what it really was, shouted gleefully: "It's Shoshones! Washakie's bunch! Watch yore shootin' men; don't hit none o' them Shoshone bucks. They're driving Standin' Bear's varmints to hell an' gawn. Look!"

From a dozen points around Fort Laramie wild-riding Shoshone braves drove the Sioux down into the bowl formed by the rolling hills. Rifles from the fort wall began barking rapidly as the fleeing Sioux fought bitterly against the surprise attack of Washakie's warriors. As soon as a circle of Shoshones rounded a bunch of Sioux within range the fort walls blossomed with smoke. Vengeance slugs emptied saddles; savages sprawled in the dust, horses screamed and toppled head over heels. Bullets and arrows filled the air.

On a hillside not far from the fort a grim hand-to-hand battle raged between the Shoshones and the Sioux. Horses were running wild and riderless while Washakie's avengers fell upon Standing Bear's own camp with tomahawk and scalping knife. Major Harner, with his glass glued to his eyes, cried out in excited voice: "Matt Skelton! Oh, Matt! Here, take these glasses—look! It's Peter Sharpe! Half naked up there fighting like an Indian —you can see his white skin!"

Old Matt stared, a broad grin on his bearded face. It was Peter, like a man gone berserk, flailing right and left. Old Matt wiped his eyes. A storm of racing horsemen swept over the hill crest. The mighty din of battle thundered in his ears as Shoshone and white men cut the Sioux down or drove them howling into the hazy distance. The fight on the hill was over. Only small mounds here and there marked the vanquished redskins and horses downed to rise no more.

Sighting along his rifle barrel, Old Matt fired at a Sioux who was trying to crawl away from a spot near the wall where he had fallen. The Sioux jerked, then stiffened in the sand.

Yelling, victorious Shoshones scoured the hills chasing the Sioux in furious flight before them. The smoke of the battle lifted like a veil in the rising blaze of sun, and in the blue sky countless darkening dots took shape, soaring silently in circles overhead.

THAT night, some hours after the rising of the moon, a horseman riding a pure white pony hailed the fort with a call in the Indian tongue, and waited arm lifted high. The sentry covered him with his rifle and called the guard. Major Harner, sleepless and alert, came along. The Indian spoke his name. Indian, Shoshone. Bring message white brother, Sharpe.

The gate swung open and Fleet Deer, a Washakie warrior, rode in to smoke a pipe with Major Harner and bring the word that the scout, Peter Sharpe, had been wounded in a hand-to-hand fight with Standing Brown Bear, whom he had killed.

Old Matt who listened eagerly, swore under his breath for there were women listening too, among them Beth Benning. She stared blankly at the Indian courier as the realization of what he said dawned upon her consciousness.

"Shoshones are brave men and great warriors," said the major to the redskin. "When you return you will tell the great chief, Washakie, that he must visit us here at the fort."

Fleet Deer grunted and disclosed then the most important and welcome part of his message. Peter Sharpe's wound had been a bad one but not mortal. Washakie had had a travois made and had born the white scout back to their village that he might get well quickly. Truth was that Sharpe had been picked up after the fight, unconscious, and was carried away by his red friends. As soon as he was able to ride Sharpe would rejoin the train on the trail.

"You no wait for Pete," concluded Fleet Deer. "He get better, he bombye ride fast pony." The Indian pointed in the direction that the Overland Trail followed westward. He made the Indian signs for "suns" which Old Matt and the trappers understood and interpreted.

There was mingled sadness and rejoicing

within the fort at the news. But at the same time no word had come from Farrell. What had happened to him, they could only guess. Old Matt conferred with his wagon train leaders and it was decided to start out again in the morning. With the Sioux vanished they must press on. The season would overtake them in the mountains and they would all perish.

"You'll inform Delaine," said Frank Woodward to Old Matt, "that his connection with our party has ended? Or shall I?"

Old Matt agreed to dispose of Delaine diplomatically. Admitting that he'd rather call the so-and-so outside the walls and shoot him down like a mad wolf, Old Matt sought out the man in the dead of the night and wasted no words.

"We're moving on tomorrow, Delaine 'r Torrand," advised Old Matt, "and I don't want any more trouble with you. You make yore own tracks from here. East 'r West, don't make no difference, 'cept, if yuh head West yuh start afore us an' travel fast."

Torrand, which he insisted was his name, swore hotly and tried to argue with the old plainsman. He ranted and raved and cursed but Old Matt stood firm, his hand on his pistol meaningly. Torrand gave in.

"Very well," he agreed finally. "You get Harner to sell me some mules an' horses. There are men in the party who agree with me. We'll go on—by ourselves."

Old Matt lost no time making arrangements with Major Harner. The next morning saw Delaine and his companions, a half dozen of the worst types on the roster of the train, leave Fort Laramie. The settlers watched them go with sighs of relief. Many cursed the day Delaine joined them. Men and women had died because of his acts.

At noon, after a frugal lunch, goodbyes were said and the wagons forded the Platte to roll away into the western wilderness. Seated with her mother on the Benning wagon, now drawn by mules replacing the slaughtered bull-team, Beth rode thoughtfully. It was a cruel, primitive land. A dashing, clear-eyed man had ridden into her life—and out of it too soon, too suddenly.

"Remember what the Indian said, dear," soothed her mother. "One of these days he'll ride up beside our wagon as if nothing had happened. Old Captain Matt told you too. No one knows Peter Sharpe better than he."

DAY after day the wagons crawled ploddingly, following the ruts of the Overland Trail. Whenever possible, Old Matt would take a couple of the best marksmen and ride out of camp to bring back a couple of black-tailed deer or bear. This was a welcome change in the simple menu.

On their way the old plainsman noted the recent camps of Delaine's gang, but never a sight did they get of their late companion. Without wagons, Delaine would of course travel faster. And the Devil take him.

They crossed Horse Shoe Creek and La Bonte Creek, or "crick" as Old Matt called them. One day they reached the famed Red Buttes and were deluged by a sudden torrential downpour for which the region was notorious.

Each sun showed them new wonders, strange formations of earth and rock, tier upon tier of mountains stretching away into the blue beyond. Past Independence Rock, the Devil's Gate. On and on, climbing treacherous heights, plunging down rain-washed slopes, fording rivers where men bent their backs with might and main. The nights became chill and the stock wandered; some never to be found.

One day they met a long train and stopped to swap news. The party was coming from Fort Hall, bound for Santa Fe by way of the Cherokee Trail.

"Met a pack outfit just this side o' the Pass," the grizzled leader told Old Matt, whom he greeted as Captain Bones. "Hard lookin' lot ef I'm a judge."

Old Matt nodded. The men smoked and talked and some of the women took the opportunity to gather strange wildflowers beside the trail. When the trains parted and Old Matt shouted "Forward" he remembered the pack outfit. "Must be Delaine. We're creeping up on him."

Night found them camped near the mysterious Ice Slough, whre, worn and weary, they fixed their fires and rolled into blankets. Bats from the cliffs and crevices in the towering rocks fluttered like whispering ghosts in the darkness beyond the

firelight. Four of the men stood silently on guard, resting on their long rifle barrels.

Ten thousand bull frogs "chunked" a serenade from the creek and crickets chirped an endless tribute to the myriad of stars.

LIKE a clap of deafening thunder wild savage yells suddenly rent the silent camp. Into the midst of the sleeping party plunged painted slashing devils. In a single instant peaceful slumber changed to a mad whirlwind of bloody carnage. With tomahawk and knife the raiders fell upon the unwary emigrants. Cries of maimed and dying filled the night. Old Matt, scrambling for his pistol in the dark, was knocked breathless by the rushing stampede of men, fighting clamorously to pick the attackers from their friends.

"Light! Help—more light," someone screamed. A woman cried out in horror. The camp fires, kicked by struggling men, sent soaring sparks upward, but like ghouls the painted savages flayed right and left, ripping clothing from inert bodies, searching, hunting for—money belts and bags.

Shooting now began. Bullets screamed and whistled, thudded into the circle of wagon bodies. A picketed horse screamed in its death song. Old Matt fired at a paint smeared creature caught in the glare of a new fed blaze. He saw the Indian clutch at his belly, heard the curse that fouled the man's bloody lips. A white man's curse in a white man's tongue. Hellions!

"At 'em, men," roared Old Matt, probing the fitful light for a target. Then he heard a girl's cry for help, a cry of mortal terror. Across the inferno he plunged toward the far wagons. And as he ran his ears warned him. More were coming, more of these human vultures.

"Spread out, men!" he shouted hoarsely. "Separate. Quick! These are white men—It's—it's DELAINE. God have mercy on you, you—" Old Matt fired again, and his pistol clicked on a "shot" cap. He snatched out his knife and stumbled, half blinded by the smoke and dust, groping over sprawling forms.

"Woodward! Benning! Wanchette!" He called right and left. Then he saw Benning in the light of a flaming wagon cover, clutching his hysterical wife and looking about him like a crazy man. "Benning—snap out of it, man. What's the mat—"

Before Benning could form the words another factor burst into the shambles. Over the fierce din of the fighting swept the rising rumble of swift horses' hoofs and a volume of shrill voices, high pitched, excited. And suddenly Old Matt's ears told him one of those voices came from the throat of Peter Sharpe.

"Surround 'em," he heard Sharpe's vibrant shout. "We ain't too late. Hallo Woodward! Careful! Don't shoot my Shoshone friends!"

Old Matt tried to leap between two wagons and saw swiftly, almost a wagon length from his hand, the upraised claw of a painted devil with a tomahawk lifted. Another second and it would have been buried in the head of a man who crouched trembling on the grass.

The knife in the old frontiersman's hand fairly whistled as it was flung. The hatchet flew in a tumbling arc, but the hand that had held it was fastened tight to a wagon body, its owner terror-stricken.

"Beth! Beth! Where are you?" Amos Benning cried out in agony.

Peter Sharpe, at the name, flung himself from his foam-flecked horse and rushed to Benning. The father stared at him a moment, and motioned. "She was right here, asleep. Now she's gone."

"I saw a man," yelled a mother from the nearest wagon. "Looked like—a Injun. Just snatched her up and run to a horse. I hollered, but I was afraid to shoot—with her in his arms kickin' so."

For a moment Peter Sharpe stood tense. Then he shot commands right and left. Shoshones spread out. Men built up the fires quickly. Took a fast check of wounded and— Someone cried out from the western end of the wagon circle. A horse had run that way into the night.

A Shoshone brave picked a blazing brand from a fire and galloped off in the direction indicated as the trail of the fleeing horse. Peter Sharpe followed him, sweat standing salty on his rigid lip. Old Matt, facing the painted "Injun" he had pinned to the wagon body, called after Sharpe. "Wait a minute, Peter," he strained. "It's Delaine! Delaine's got the gal."

As Old Matt jerked his knife free, the prisoner slumped to the ground begging for mercy. He heard Sharpe's horse start away into the dark at a mad run and he dragged the inert man toward the fire. Here the light told the story of a Rio Grande breed, painted and feathered like a redskin. "You're Pancho, damn you!" Old Matt kicked the cringing killer a blow in the belly. "How many of you? Come on, make plenty medicine, yuh coyote. Talk fast an' true, 'r I'll skin ye alive!"

Pancho, the breed driver who had been one of Delaine's original killers hired by the now dead Ned Cleyton at Independence, was bleeding badly and getting weaker as he told the story of Delaine's infamy. The whole nightmarish scheme was laid bare from its inception. Men and women ringed him in by the fire. Some of them had to be restrained forcibly, for the urge to rend him limb from limb was certainly justified. Now, too late to save those who had suffered because of Delaine, they learned of the shadow through which they had marched unknowing almost a thousand miles.

A PALE moon had risen above the distant mountains shedding a wierd smoky light over the camp. The mist which blanketed the bottom land sparkled like a spangled fairyland gauze in the flames of the rebuilt camp fires. Grim-faced men and women, working solemnly, had brought some order out of the chaos. The wounded, almost a score of brave emigrants, were being cared for, but four of the party had reached the end of the trail. Two of these were guards, found outside the wagon circle with their throats cut.

In a row close to a roaring fire lay five bodies smeared and streaked with red, yellow and black, one of them still wearing the full feathered war bonnet of a Sioux chieftain. Near them, propped on a bundle of kindlings, lay the breed, Pancho, guarded closely. Life for Pancho was fast ebbing.

He lived however, long enough to see the return to camp of Peter Sharpe and his Shoshone blood-brothers. Sharpe was riding a frothy hard brown horse and across his saddle he held Beth Benning, the light from the fires gilding her hair, a marble statue, except for her terrified eyes. And, bound snugly with rawhide thongs, the man Delaine was being dragged into the lighted circle of faces.

A dozen men leaped for Delaine, but Peter Sharpe, stern and commanding, shouted: "Hold off, there, friends! Swear in a jury, Woodward; we'll try him right here and now. Somebody help me down with the lady."

Restored to her parents, Beth Benning was escorted to her wagon. A jury was quickly selected. Sharpe had returned just in time to see, with his own eyes, the trembling pointed finger of Pancho, as they brought Delaine to him. "Him," whispered the breed, through bloody lips. "He plan ev'ything. He devil."

Old Matt retailed the entire fiendish scheme as conceived by the murdering gambler Delaine at Natchez-under-the-Hill. It bore out all the other things; Rolling Stone's story of murder in St. Louis, the motive for Cleyton's attempt to slay Delaine; the arch-fiend's vaunted hatred for authority on the trail. And now he was caught red-handed.

"Look!" shouted Sharpe, lifting his hand, and addressing the jury. "This man is a murderer many times, a thief and an abductor of women. Three money belts and a doeskin pouch of money identified as the property of four members of this train were found on Delaine when we captured him just now. Can there be any defense by a beast like him?"

Delaine looked from one face to another, like a wolf in a trap. His black eyes flickered and sweat dripped from his brow. He struggled with the bonds that held his wrists. The jury, after a brief talk, nodded to Bill Kearns who came forward.

"Delaine," said Kearns vibrantly, "we find you guilty as hell. There seems to be no punishment painful enough to measure your crimes. So we'll just hang you an' get it over with."

There was an ominous rumble from the settlers, and, as if by magic, a long rope was waved in the firelight. "There's a tree over yonder!"

"Just a moment, gentlemen," broke in Sharpe, who with Old Matt had busied himself reloading his big dragoon pistols. "I have a little personal matter to settle with Mister Delaine. We'll remove his leather bracelets. Mister Benning, will

you please ask Beth if she will come over here?"

Walking into the firelight, still somewhat dazed, Beth paused, glanced from Sharpe to Delaine.

"Before you meet yore Maker, Delaine," said Peter, "you'll get down on yore knees an' beg this lady's forgiveness." The girl raised a hand to shut the scene from her eyes, but she stood bravely, rigid. Delaine seethed, stubbornly silent, and Peter Sharpe smashed him full in the face with a resounding open palm. "On yore knees!" he thundered.

Delaine shouted incoherently and fell to his knees, mumbling, then leaped up, turning on Sharpe as if to strike. Instead, he screamed a torrent of maledictions on the scout: "I swear I'll haunt you, Sharpe, for this!"

"Yore hauntin' days are over, Delaine," snapped the scout. "Take him away, gentlemen, an' thank yore stars yo're alive to do it."

A great cheer went up from the assembled wagon-train. "String him up! String him up!"

Gray fear cloaked Delaine's face. Great beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead and trickled down into his eyes. He struggled frantically, but the buckskin thongs that bound him were strong and well tied. He knew that for him it was the finish.

"For Lord's sake, men!" he croaked. "You can't do this. I'll do anything. Anything. But you can't string me up!"

He fell to his knees before the group of silent, disgusted men. Sobs, prayers, curses poured in a babbling stream from his ashen lips.

"I've had jest about enuff of this," a bearded wagoner spat. "Come on, boys, here's the rope an' there's a tree."

Beneath a shadowy cottonwood a rope was flung. While the women hid their faces and muffled their ears a burly settler halted beside the furtive Delaine. Had they forgotten to bind his arms again? "Bring him up," called a voice. A short vicious struggle. Delaine, like a snapping wild cat, clawed his way free and flung himself toward a horse whose hobbles he did not see. There was a shout.

Across the intervening space dashed Peter Sharpe. In a flash he saw the killer in desperation urging the bewildered horse into a frantic bucking run. Drawing his pistol, the scout fired a single shot.

"Deader'n a Hopi mummy," pronounced Old Matt.

FOR some days the memory of that fitful night haunted the party as it marched westward, climbing the steepening heights of South Pass. New scenes, new wonders, gradually restored the morale; brought them all closer together in their common cause. The wilderness had passed judgment.

When the wagons reached the Little Sandy the leaders held a pow-wow in which Sharpe and Old Matt persuaded them to take Sublette's cut-off instead of turning south for Fort Bridger. Much time had been lost on the journey and snow came early and sudden in the Rockies. It would be best to follow the well-marked desert trail along Green River. And so they marched.

Where the cut-off joins again the original trail from Bridger to Soda Springs and Fort Hall, they met a great wagon train bound for California via Hudspeth's Cut-off from Soda Springs. With this they readily consolidated, and the vast caravan of canvas, united in strength of men and weapons, a single goal and a new eagerness born of sturdy pioneer American courage, set out valiantly on the last leg of the Overland Trail. The way was clear, a well-marked route, and California just over the Sierras.

Beside the Benning wagon, upon the seat of which sat Beth and her mother, rode the scout, Peter Sharpe. In a wagon behind them a boy plunked happily at banjo strings and, to the timing of the tramping bull-teams' hoofs, voices joined heartily:

"Oh, Susannah, don't you cry for me,
For I'm off to Californ-i-a
With a banjo on my knee."

FAMOUS GUNMEN

By JOHN M. SCANLAND

The fastest shot in the Southwest—A killer who gave nor asked quarter. That was Billy the Kid, the most deadly and merciless outlaw the Old West ever knew.

A YOUNG man named William H. Bonney, generally known as "Billy the Kid," about a generation ago, was the most desperate, daring and bloodthirsty "gun man" in the Southwest, and, since his timely death at the hands of sheriff Pat. H. Garret, none have arisen to take his place.

There have been many imitators, but, like all imitations, they were rank failures —usually of the two-gun stage villain variety. When Bonney entered upon his career he was only 17 years of age, and it lasted about six years, during which time he killed twenty-four men. How many others were killed by his gang was never

known. But, Billy owned up to this number, according to his best recollection. He was the central figure in the "Lincoln County War," which raged in New Mexico in the late 'seventies, during which time about two hundred people were killed, nearly all of whom were cattlemen, including rustlers. This was a war of several sides and angles: "Cattle kings against other kings; owners of small ranches against kings who wanted to hog everything; kings and small ranchers against new settlers who took up lands and water rights, and all of these against the knights of the range known as "rustlers." Thus, there were as many issues, almost, as in an international war, and the fighting was more desperate as it was always at close range.

Cowboys, as a rule, fought on the side of their employers. But, there were exceptions. For example: Billy, the Kid. He was employed as a vaquero by the Murphy-Donlon faction, and deserted to the Tunstall faction which paid more. Bonney did not consider the cause. These were rival "kings," each heading an "army" of ranchers whose interests were similar. A vaquero was required to be not only handy with the lariat but also a good shot. Billy was both, and in addition he had an iron nerve tempered with steel. He had been a cattle rustler on his own account and had made a "record."

The seat of this war of the ranges was in a "pocket" strip of territory known as Lincoln and Dona Ana Counties in the southeastern part of New Mexico. It is bordered by Texas on the southeast, Arizona on the west, and Mexico on the south. To this open range cattlemen came from all sections, rustlers naturally followed, also "gun men," thieves, gamblers, and bad men of all degrees from all sections. Texas had exiled some of its worst bad men, and they halted in this "pocket," as the most promising field for their industry. About the same time, or early in the 'seventies, California had exiled a number of its train robbers, gamblers, cattle rustlers, and thugs. They also drifted down into this corner where they would be free from the interference of the law. Here, the scum of the earth had settled, and for about seven years, or from 1875 until 1882, the "pocket" was known as the bloodiest section in the United States. During this time, as stated above, about 200 people were killed. A few murderers were sent to the penitentiary, but no one was hanged. Many of the courts as well as most of the police officers were cowardly or corrupt.

Several officers had been killed, including sheriffs and deputies, and it was difficult to get men with nerve to accept these dangerous positions. The law was practically a dead letter. Justice was dealt by revolver and Winchester. There was no jail in either of the counties. Arrests were so few that the officials evidently did not deem it necessary to build these much needed institutions.

The rustler business was very prosperous, for there were two military posts in that vicinity, at which there were from 2,000 to 3,000 soldiers who were ordered to hold the Indians in check. These soldiers needed beef. Thus, rustlers found a new market, competing with the ranchers.

There had been occasional skirmishes on the border, but the real war was begun by John Chisholm, who had the title of "king of the kings." His ranch was about one hundred miles square, and he had about eighty thousand head of cattle, and thousands of horses in addition. Chisholm claimed that not only the rustlers, but the small ranchers and some of the kings of the second class were branding his mavericks, and trespassing upon his grazing grounds. The same charges were made against Chisholm. Finally, the Chisholm and Murphy-Donlon clans clashed, and several were killed and wounded on each side. Chisholm had come to the "pocket" from Texas shortly after the end of the war between the States, and, as he had served in the Confederate army he knew something of the tactics of war. He led his forces and was the victor in this engagement.

So much as a prelude to this "war," which made Lincoln county the bloodiest spot in the United States. It also developed the most noted "gun man" known in the bloody history of the West—"Billy, the Kid." Strangely, his history was written by his slayer.

WILLIAM H. BONNEY, alias "Billy, the Kid," was born in New York City in 1859. He was of Irish descent on

his mother's side. His father dying, the widow, Kathleen, with Billy and an elder brother, went to Coffeyville, Kansas, thence to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she married a worthless fellow named Jim Antrim. Then the restless woman moved to Silver City, a new mining town, mainly populated by gamblers, rustlers, stage robbers, and women of the underworld. Billy remained from home as much as possible mainly because of the ill-treatment by his drunken step-father. One night in a saloon, a bully named Wm. Broadus, who had been thrown out of his mother's restaurant for not paying his bill, made an insulting remark about her which he intended for Billy's ear. The boy called him a liar as the fellow advanced to strike him, but was knocked down by Ed Moulton, a stranger to Billy and his mother. Billy thanked him, and they became friends. A few nights later Billy and his champion were again in the saloon. The bully was evidently waiting for Moulton. Drawing a bowie knife he rushed toward Moulton whose back was turned. But, Billy, who was facing in the opposite direction, saw the would-be assassin, quickly drew his revolver and fired. The fellow fell with a bullet in his heart. Billy shook hands with his friend and went out of the saloon, still holding his revolver. No one interfered.

He fled from the town and for three days wandered on the highways, almost starving for he had no money and would not beg.

ONE night in passing Knight's ranch he stole a horse and galloped away riding until daylight in the direction of Albuquerque, which was even a tougher town than Santa Fe. He was now an outlaw and on the high road that leads to prison or to the gallows. En route he held up a Mexican ranch, where he got a stock of provisions, and a few dollars. He now cut across and went to Fort Bowie near the Arizona border. He found work on a ranch near by. This was the beginning of his cowboy career. Another adventure awaited him—his first in that line. He fell beneath the spell of a more or less fair maiden, and, of course, thought that he was the only one she had on the string. But, the maiden was under the spell of the brass buttons of a soldier at the Fort. The soldier objected to this invasion, and issued an order for Billy to keep off the ranch.

In a quarrel, the bully advanced and raised his saber to strike. Billy stepped back and shot the soldier, who fell dead at his feet. This was his second killing, and he was only 17 years of age. He then doubled back toward the New Mexican border, and met a knight of the road on foot who gave the name of "Alias." The fellow had perhaps heard it in court, and dropped his real name. Billy did not ask his true name, nor did he give his own. "Alias" was in bad luck, it seemed, and as he had no horse Billy took him up behind, and on one horse the young highwaymen started out.

In a few hours they met a good Indian returning from a settlement store where he had gone to trade gold nuggets for "fire water." Billy ordered the noble red man to hold up his hands. The Indian did not understand that kind of talk, and furthermore, showed signs of anger at the men who stood in his path. Billy drew his revolver and shot the Indian. As he fell to the ground the youthful murderer put another bullet into his dead body. The Indian's horse being the better, Billy took it, and gave his to Alias. Now, they were full fledged and well equipped highwaymen. They crossed over into New Mexico into the Mesilla Valley where they met a "bunch" of rustlers—Jesse Evans, Jose Segura, James Daniels, Frank Baker, and Wm. Morton. They seemed to take a liking to Billy, for they had heard of troubles on the Arizona border and suspected the youths. They suggested that they unite forces and go to the "pocket" down in Lincoln county, where business was good, and—the law was asleep. This seemed good to Billy, but did not strike Alias favorably. He had seen enough blood. The brutal killing of the poor Indian caused him to balk. Next night, which was neither very dark nor stormy, he stole away with Billy's horse, and was never heard of more. They knighted Billy, and called him the Kid.

EN ROUTE to the new land the gang stopped off at El Paso on the border of Mexico, which then was one of the toughest places in the West. Naturally, they went to a gaming house. "Tiger"

Blanco, an ex-convict from New Orleans, was dealing monte. Now, Billy had also dealt monte and knew that when the dealer pulled two cards at once he was swindling. Billy's keen eyes detected Blanco in this act. He took his money off the card just as the dealer reached for it. With an oath Blanco demanded that he hand over the money, and reached for his bowie knife. But, the youth was too quick for him, and sent a bullet through his heart. To make sure he fired another bullet into the dead body. In the game of killing the Kid always aimed to have a "sure thing." Billy and his gang then plundered the bank, and left, Billy covering the retreat with his revolver.

They then rode away to the "pocket" where "business was good." There, they got employment as cowboys or gunfighters, and did rustling on the side. Sometimes they were divided and confronted each other in protecting the ranches of their employers. Bonney seemed to be the best fighter of them all. He loved fighting because of its excitement and had killed for the love of killing. In these "wars" Bonney killed Frank Baker and Wm. Morton, two of his former associates who had welcomed him into their fold and conferred upon him the title of "The Kid." Later, in a purely personal difficulty, he killed Bill Roberts, formerly a member of his gang. For this he was indicted. Sheriff Wm. Brady, with deputies George Hindman and J. B. Mathews started for the stronghold of the gang to arrest Bonney. They lived in a cave cut in a quarry of rock in the foothills. This commanded a view of the valley below, and when they saw the men approaching, they prepared for action, for they naturally presumed that they were officers. They hid behind rocks, and as the officers crept up they were killed—each officer receiving two bullets in his head. The fortified "castle" was now abandoned, and the gang separated, each man for himself. They were all indicted on the charge of murder.

THE office of sheriff was now vacant—there were neither sheriff nor deputies. It was one of the strangest things that ever happened in official life. Many refused the office—again something unusual. Finally, a man came forward and said he would take the office. He had no opposition. It was "Pat." H. Garret, who had come from North Louisiana and bought a ranch near Lincoln, the tough village of Lincoln county.

The first thing in order was to squelch Billy the Kid, who was now the principal figure in the "war." As long as he rode the range there would be killing and rustling. With this aim sheriff Garret took Billy's trail, armed with two revolvers and the warrant charging Bonney with murder. The sheriff had heard of Billy, of course, but had never seen him. The two features he kept in mind were Billy's youthfulness and his peculiar hat with a dent in the crown. The sheriff, with five deputies surprised the gang in a cabin. Their horses were hitched near the door so as to be within easy reach if needed. The sheriff had received inside information from James Wilcox who owned a ranch nearby and had suffered by their depredations. The cabin was surrounded in the early morning and at daylight the rustlers were awakened by a morning salute. Sheriff Garret had fired a shot into the door. The Kid looked out through an opening, but he saw no one. However, he knew they were there, and asked what was wanted.

The sheriff replied "Billy, the Kid. Is he there?"

"I am the Kid, come and take me, Pat; I know you are after me."

Garret then shot the horse in front of the door, and the animal fell across the entrance, thus barring the entrance. He and another officer then shot at the ropes of the other four horses and cut them in two. The frightened animals ran away, thus crippling the chances of escape, even if the rustlers should decide to attempt it under a fire from the officers. An occasional shot was sent through the door, hoping that it might find a good lodgment and to show the rustlers that their "fort" was besieged. It so happened that their provisions were short—in fact they had reached the bottom of their chuck wagon. Late in the afternoon the door was seen to open a few inches. A shot struck the door. Then a hand was extended with a white handkerchief.

"If you mean to give up, come out Kid, with your hands up!" commanded Garret.

The Kid walked out, holding aloft the

emblem of surrender. Garret and as assistant advanced and met him, while the other deputies covered him with their guns, fearing treachery.

"We are starving, or we would never give up, Pat," exclaimed the Kid. "We will go with you and take our chances on the law."

ON trial Bonney was convicted and sentenced to be hanged on October 13, 1881. His four confederates were sent to the State prison on charges of robbery. The "war" now ceased, practically, except skirmishes in a few localities. Now, that there was a semblance of the enforcement of law, or, rather, the beginning, with sheriff Garret and his deputies in the saddle, the people were encouraged and felt some degree of safety for their lives and herds. They were no longer afraid to give secret information to officers, for they knew they were not giving this information to confederates of the thieves. The law abiding people came to the support of the Courts, and the judges were not cowed into submission to the warring cattle kings.

While Bonney was being taken to jail a mob assembled at the railroad depot and shouted, "hang the murderer." There was much excitement on the train, the only ones remaining cool were Garret and his prisoner. "Pat; take off these irons, give me a six-shooter, and I'll scatter that bunch of cowards," said Bonney.

But, Garret was afraid to trust Billy with a gun, and decided to do the scattering himself. He stood at the rear platform with two revolvers, and was greeted with: "Let's take the Kid off and hang him."

Garret exclaimed in a mild voice: "The first man who attempts to board this train will be killed, and I'll keep shooting." The man in front stopped, the crowd halted and looked at Garret who had his two revolvers trained upon them. Then, the cowards sunk away.

The Kid complimented the sheriff on his nerve, and they became friends. That is, Billy admired Garret, as one brave man does another. As an appreciation, the Kid had his picture taken—the first time he ever sat, or rather stood for one, and gave it to the sheriff.

The Kid was five feet eight inches in height; weighed 135 pounds, his form was well knit and active, his hair was thick and glossy, but not worn long like the braggarts of the two-gun variety. His eyes were deep blue and expressive, and his face slightly oval, and clean shaven. A noticeable feature were two projecting upper front teeth. These did not disfigure his face, but were sufficiently prominent to attract attention. He was never known to laugh—that is, the uproarious guffaw, and he seldom smiled. His facial expression was rather inclined to the serious, but not forbidding. He seldom spoke, and then his words were few, and of a commanding or positive nature. He had the innate elements of a leader, and, if trained in the right direction would no doubt have become successful in some important walk in life. But environment and cirumstances directed him to another path.

AS stated, there was no jail at the county seat, and the Kid was put in a room in the second floor of the Court House, there to wait his doom on the 13th of October. He was "hog-tied," feet and hands, and two officers guarded him. They would take no chances with this caged lion. The Kid had one month to think of his past, which was short but exciting. As to the future—he did not know. He concluded that he had rather die fighting than by the rope, and in the presence of a motley crowd, many of whom deserved the noose. So, he devised a plan: that he would try when the two officers should be temporarily separated.

The chance came just two days before the one appointed for his execution. That morning one of the guards, Frank Ollinger, put 18 buckshot in his gun, while loading it in the presence of the condemned man. In a threatening tone he sneered: "The fellow who gets this will feel it." Billy looked at the boaster and smiled grimly. About two hours afterward one of the guards went down stairs on some pretence. A few minutes later the Kid framed an excuse and asked to be taken down stairs. With his heavily charged shotgun the other guard started with the Kid allowing him to walk a few steps in advance. Reaching a turn on the stairs landing the prisoner quickly turned, raised his manacled hands and struck the officer on the head which felled

him to the floor. Instantly, the Kid seized the shotgun and poured the eighteen buck-shot into his body. He then threw the gun on the dead body and took from it a six-shooter. On second thought he fired another shot into the body to "make sure."

Hearing the shots the other officer ran up the stairs two steps at a jump thinking that, of course, the Kid had received the eighteen buck-shot. As he neared the landing the Kid gave him a center shot. Stooping over the body he gave him another. It was Billy's habit to finish a job, especially of this nature.

He then went to the sheriff's office, which, strangely, was vacant, and helped himself to two revolvers and a Winchester. With these ready for action he hobbled across the street, through a crowd, and went into a blacksmith shop. He easily persuaded the smithy to file in two the chain that connected the shackles on his feet, and then mounted a horse waiting to be shod. Firing a shot in the air he rode out of town, the chain jangling from his leg. Not one of the crowd felt moved to try to overhaul him.

THE village was in an uproar over this daring escape and the murder of the officers. Also, the people were disappointed at being cheated out of their expected amusement—the hanging of the Kid. The gleam of hope for law and order gave way to indignation and a fear of insecurity. The lion was again loose, and the reign of terror would be renewed.

But, sheriff Garret was one of those who "never sleep." He again took up the trail of the man whose life he had saved from death at the hands of a mob, and who had given him his photo to "keep as long as he lived." It was now a question of death for one of them, perhaps both, for a character like the Kid, especially with the noose hanging over his head, would not be taken alive. And here, also, entered the question of the "drop," which is nine points in a gun play. The Kid was very quick and always shot from the hip; so did Garret. It was a match of wits, and, in addition, there must be considered the elements of chance which enters into almost every important event.

For several months the sheriff and his deputies followed false clues, given by friends of the Kid, and by fake newspaper reporters who hatched out their sensations. Finally, Garret got a "wireless" message that the Kid was employed as a cowboy on Pete Maxwell's ranch in the western part of New Mexico. This was one of the largest ranches in the west, and the question of the ownership of the Maxwell Land Grant figured in the Courts several years. There were about 50,000 cattle on the ranch, and many horses and sheep. The Kid was known only as "Billy." It seems that he held an important position, as he lived in the main ranch house with Maxwell and was on rather familiar terms with him—more so than that of an ordinary cowboy. Whether Maxwell knew his record was doubted. Certainly not that he was under sentence of death. Another report was, and it is the more probable, that Maxwell did not at first know the Kid, or his record, but employed him on his appearance, which is done almost everywhere. Finally, he learned that the Kid was a killer, and, in addition, was under a sentence of death. This record was sent to Maxwell by a rancher named Wilcox, from whom the Kid's gang had stolen a bunch of cattle. Then, the "wireless" was sent to the sheriff.

ONE evening, about twilight, three men, apparently cowboys, rode up to the front gate of the Maxwell ranch house. They were received by Maxwell, the leader introducing himself and the others. They met as if old friends. Their horses were sent to the stable, and after refreshments two of them took positions behind hedges, one on each side of the path that led to the door. The other returned to Maxwell's room, which fronted on the yard. It was sheriff Garret. The lamp had not been lighted and the sheriff and Maxwell were seated on the sofa talking in a low tone. The Kid always reported to his boss at about 8 o'clock in the evening to take orders for the next day, as he was a kind of a boss around the stables. It was now about 7:30 and the conversation continued. Perhaps Garret was relating the thrilling incidents of the capture of the Kid, his murder of the two guardsmen and escape. The old fashioned family clock on the mantel slowly struck eight, and in a few minutes the gate was heard to shut, and

a dog barked. Garret took one of his revolvers from the holster.

As the Kid neared the door he heard a rustling of leaves. He drew his revolver, stopped and listened, and looked at the hedge. Thinking it was a bird among the leaves he replaced his gun and walked into the trap. He stepped upon the gallery, and stopped, evidently hesitating. He had heard the subdued conversation. Then, he walked to the door. The conversation stopped. He again drew his revolver, and asked: "Who is it, Pete?" The answer was a shot from Garret's revolver. The Kid fell and died instantly, not knowing who had killed him. His revolver fell to the floor by his side. From his position the Kid could not see the two forms on the sofa at the farther end of the room, but the sheriff could see his form as it entered the open door. Thus, Garret had the drop on the Kid and made a center shot. The body was buried at Fort Sumner. His grave is still pointed out to tourists as that of the greatest desperado of the West. With the Kid off the range, and not likely to return, the "war" soon ended, and peace again reigned on the border.

THE sequel to the killing of the Kid was that of the killing of Pat Garret. The cause was the usual quarrel about grazing rights. Garret had a ranch near Las Cruces, New Mexico, a short distance northwest of El Paso. He had leased it to Wayne Brazel, with the privilege of grazing cattle. Instead of cattle, Brazel put sheep on the ranch, to which Garret objected on the grounds that sheep would destroy the range. He brought suit to oust Brazel. He also had Brazel arrested on the charge of trespass. Both went armed, and Brazel was known as a "gun fighter" and was feared by some of the neighbors.

One day they met in the road. Garret was going to Las Cruces and Brazel was returning. Garret was in a buggy; Brazel on horseback. Garret's revolver was lying on the floor of his buggy as they met. Thus, he was off guard, but did not expect any gun-play. Brazel had a rifle in a holster on his left side which was turned toward Garret. But, on the right side he also had a revolver, which Garret could not see. Garret kept his eyes on the rifle during the quarrel. Finally, Garret exclaimed, angrily, "if you do not get off the ranch, I'll put you off"—meaning by law, as he had brought an ejectment suit. At the moment he got out to fix the harness. Brazel drew his revolver and fired, the ball entering the side of Garret's head. Quickly, he fired another, the bullet entering his shoulder.

Brazel put the body into the buggy and drove it to Las Cruces, leading his own horse. He reported that he shot Garret in self-defense, as he thought Garret had got out of the buggy and was about to reach for his revolver. At the trial, the prosecution argued that had Garret wanted to kill Brazel he could have done so from where he sat—it was not necessary to get out of the buggy to shoot. Brazel was acquitted. One of the jurors had received a threatening note, and it was charged that some of them were influenced by fear.

I happened to be in the rough border town of El Paso, Texas, in the early part of 1907, having been shaken out of San Francisco by the great earthquake. I was looking for local color for a story, and it came ready to hand—the tragic death of the slayer of Billy, the Kid.

Also, naturally, I sought information from reliable sources, instead of rehashing the stuff written by fakers about the killing of the Kid. I called upon the daughter of the late sheriff, whose residence was in that city. Miss Garret related some of the incidents of the tragedy which she had learned from her father, and, in addition, loaned me a book written by her father, which was a history of the "Lincoln County War," with "Billy, the Kid" as the central figure. She also loaned me a tin-type picture of Billy which he had taken to give to her father as a token of friendship. This was found among the family relics.

There was no hatred between Bonney and Garret. The Kid was an outlaw, under the sentence of death, and would have killed Garret in order to save his own life, and it was Garret's duty to capture or kill the outlaw. Both of them fully understood the situation, and acted accordingly. Garret got the "drop." Chance favored him.

Thus passed one of the old west's most colorful and daring killers—Billy the Kid.

Indian Dawn— And No Powder!

By JED AGEE

A Novelet of Frontier Days

GRAEME sensed the glint of light on the arrow shaft as it sped from the copse. In a flash he flung his body forward so that his breastbone thumped against his saddlehorn, and his heels dug into the bay's flanks. The feathered death ticket whistled past his ear. A second twitched the beading of

On Graeme's back-trail lay the doomed wagon train, ringed by a blood-mad tribe. Ahead lay a clear trail to fortune. But for a slim girl's kiss the trader turned back—leading an army conjured from the valley of the dead!

his buckskin shirt—and then he had circled the copse and the enemy was before him.

Two painted Indians, daubed black and yellow, crouched with their faces half obscured by upflung bows. From the hip he swung his long rifle and fired at the first. The menacing figure collapsed and faded from Graeme's view. He ducked again as the second attacker's shaft plucked at his sleeve. He snatched the horse pistol

from the saddle holster and threw down, triggering. The weapon misfired.

The redskin, poised to leap into the bush at sight of the short gun, straightened at the futile click of the hammer. With a loud scream, he flung his bow away and flicked up a long knife.

Then he rushed.

Graeme's breath whistled through his teeth as he hurtled from the saddle. Two steps he took, stooping. When he reared upright he held level and steady a short businesslike dirk. The Indian's eyes widened in amazement; there had been no knife in the white man's belt. Then he lunged desperately, grunting with hate and the fateful effort.

Graeme's moccasined feet moved soundlessly on the short grass. His left hand shot out and grasped the wrist behind the blade. His dirk came forward like a flicker of light. But the alert redskin twisted snakily and locked Graeme's knife hand.

A moment they stood immobile, panting, two six-foot bodies taut and braced for the death slip. Graeme, sensing the strength of his foe, toed the grass for better purchase and forced his eyes off the burning hot stare of those black eyes inches from his own. He glanced to right and left, a chill coursing his spine as he considered the chance of a third enemy pouncing in.

BUT the forest was still, the silence of the green valley unbroken save by the Indian's hot gasps. It was man to man, white against red, and the long sleep for the fighter who lost the trick.

Then the Indian made his play. He lurched to his left, dragging Graeme half off balance, and with a tremendous wrench sought to free his own knife hand. But the canny Scot was ready.

He summoned his strength.

Swaying with the redskin's maneuver, he extended the sidewise plunge with his own weight, slumping to the grass. And as he felt the ground beneath him he swung a knee into the Indian's midriff. The redskin gasped, and for an instant his grip on Graeme's knife hand loosened as the dark body hung off balance. In that instant Graeme wrenched his hand free and thrust.

THE keen point found the Indian's heart. The great body slumped, then fell, inert, upon the exhausted Scot.

Graeme shuddered. With short gasping breaths he drew great draughts of air into his bursting lungs. Then he flung the body off him and staggered to his feet. A moment he stood, alert, still, listening. No sound came. No whoop rode the wind to signify that his rifle shot had been heard. Still he moved with caution. He retrieved his rifle, loaded it and leaned it against a young alder trunk. Then he picked up his pistol, replaced the faulty priming, and stuck it into his belt. His dirk he wiped on the grass. Then he knelt by the two dead Indians.

For a long moment he studied the dank black hair caught up in topknots of thong and feather, and the naked torsos covered with sweat-streaked black and yellow clay. Squinting at the vermilion paint on the now closed eyelids, he nodded soberly. Crows. On the war path.

With urgency in his step he caught up his rifle and strode to the swaybacked bay that stood, obedient but with ears laid back, at the edge of the copse. With a slap at the leathered-covered lump thonged to the cantle, to assure himself that the cut of buffalo meat was snug, he swung into the saddle and kneed the bay into the clear expanse of the valley.

It sloped down to the south where the river ran. Clumps of sprawling alder and straight-trunked cottonwood covered the clay cuts where the spring freshets had run. Farther down, small flood-smoothed boulders dotted the sandy bottom. And in the sand bed flowed the stream, chuckling pridefully with the remnants of its spring strength. This was the valley of the Cimarron in the year Eighteen-twenty-two.

Graeme palmed the pistol deeper into the saddle scabbard, settled his rifle in the crook of his arm, turned the bay east, and dug in his heels. There was no time to lose.

TREACHERY flanked the valley of the Cimarron. Treachery of Nature and of man. A fair broad stream it looked on this May morning—but in July that flowing water vanished, and the dry river bed mocked the staring eyes of travelers who

croaked their despair from parched throats. A river without water was a river of death; white men and red rode clear of the Cimarron.

And because the Cimarron yielded no hope for the trader or the war party, this was border land. No tribe claimed it—yet every tribe used it as the corridor of a swift warring stroke against red enemies, and against such unwary travelers as knew nothing of the menace in the winding stream.

Few white men knew the Cimarron. Becknell, who had won to Santa Fe the year before with calicoes that had sold for three dollars the Spanish yard, had told Graeme and his two trading partners, Taylor and Arnot, of the deadly deception that the Cimarron practiced. "Never try the Cimarron crossing without water in your casks," he had warned, and the three traders had since learned for themselves the truth of the captain's warning.

Now Graeme must ride to warn his partners, those two capable men of the trail, that the Crows were out. Up from the south, and swarming over the southern route to that fabled market for American trade, Santa Fe. The little squat adobe town where Spanish officials held out their hands for bribes and trade goods, and offered heavy Spanish dollars for the men brave enough and canny enough to win through the prairie where the scalping knife was ever sharp.

The valley opened up, the land lay level. The grass grew closer here to the purling stream. Graeme swept the peaceful scene with a careful eye, and would have rode on to the river bank, to put to the shallow ford. But no, something was wrong here.

He studied the ground, his eyes widening. Down there, near the water, the grass lay flat. Unbelieving his eyes, he rode forward, senses alert. Then he looked down.

The grass lay flat. Crushed. And not by buffalo hoofs, or merely the hoofs of horse and mule. The lone rider pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

Wagons! The marks were plain. Wide tread, dug deep in the sandy soil, flanking the small, clean cuts of mule feet. Wagons, two hundred miles and more west of the Mississippi!

The tracks bore west, and they were fresh. Not more than two hours old. The rider thought a moment, his eyes roving the valley and the rocky rims that hemmed it in. He could spare an hour. He turned his bay's head and followed the churned-up soil.

The bay, loping effortlessly, did the trick in half an hour. The high rump of the rear wagon showed on the skyline at a bend in the stream. The rider spurred, but pulled up at the bend with a quick rein at the stern command, "Halt!"

A rifleman sat a black horse in the shadow of the trees, his gun leveled. A great giant of a man, black-bearded, with a square, hard face above the beard. His eyes were thinned with suspicion and threat. But slowly the gun muzzle tilted away as its owner stared, at first in puzzlement and then in slow understanding.

THE young rider on the bay waited, calmly. He could guess the reason for the sentry's surprise. For no man rode the plains as did Durwent Graeme. His buckskin shirt was no novelty, but the kilt beneath was a rarity even to men who had traveled far.

"Wal!" exploded the sentry, urging his horse forward. "A petticoated Scot, er my name's not Taggart!"

"A Scot, aye," acknowledged Durwent Graeme. "Ye'll be with yon wagon train, I tak' it."

Taggart nodded. "An' how come you along thisaway?" he inquired in surly curiosity.

"I'm oot for a bit buffalo," said Graeme. "To feed my two pairtners and mysel' the night. We trade, from the Dakotah plains to Santa Fe and Saint Louis forbye."

"Trader, hey?" grunted Taggart. He hesitated a moment, then added curtly, "We make night camp near. Would yah like to stop?"

Graeme nodded, and set his bay in motion. Taggart ranged alongside. His appraising glance took in the sagging buckskin roll wrapped in buckskin and thonged to the Scot's saddle.

Graeme saw the look and read it correctly. "Yon's from a buffalo two miles back. Gin ye need fresh meat, I—" He hesitated.

"Wal?" Taggart snorted. "Ye could show us the way, I reckon."

"Aye." Graeme nodded. "But there's

more than buffalo yonder." He surveyed the train guardian moodily. "Two Crows attacked me an hour's ride north."

Taggart stiffened. "Injuns?" He studied Graeme shrewdly. "How'd ye come out?"

"They're dead and a'," Graeme assured him. "But how many more may be roaming near I couldna say."

Taggart stroked his beard. "We're in purty fair shape," he muttered. Picking up his reins, he gestured. "Let's ride in to camp."

Neither spoke as the Scot kneed the bay beside Taggart. When they topped a rise, and saw the wagon train fanned out in two facing semicircles, Graeme asked abruptly, "Ye'll be the train captain?" As Taggart nodded, he asked again, "An' sentries are oot?"

"Good men on watch," Taggart grunted. "All th' others are building the fort and store."

"Fort?" asked Graeme, amazed.

But Taggart missed his expression of dismay. For the wagon train was astir at sight of the stranger. From the six canvas-topped prairie schooners men, women and a few children came curious and expectant. As Graeme rode into their line of sight they stared openly. A girl, hidden in the throng, laughed.

Taggart grinned sourly at the calm Scot. "They hain't used to petticoated men," he chuckled. He held up a hand and beckoned to his charges. "Folks," he called, "this here's a trader from the Dakotahs, bound fer Santy Fe." A gray-beard, moving closer to the two with a motherly woman and a slim girl beside him, spoke up then.

"Welcome, stranger," he cried, offering a hand. "Providin' fer traders is my job. I aim to run the store here. Name's Forester."

Graeme bowed, and doffed his fur bonnet with the silver badge to the two women as he took the storekeeper's hand. "Durwent Graeme is my name," he said simply, then turned to Taggart.

THE train captain had been counting his followers. Satisfied that all but the men on watch were present, he cleared his throat. "Folks, friend Graeme brings us news. They's Injuns about."

The chatter of the gathering halted at once. In the stillness a woman's slow voice murmured a prayerful word.

Graeme spoke up. "Crows. They're from the south. I met only two."

"Did they see you?" asked the wife of Forester practically.

"Aye," said Graeme.

The slim girl put her hand to her cheek. "And—they rode away?"

"Na, na, lass," Graeme told her, meeting her questing eyes with sober gaze.

"Then—ah!" She covered her mouth with slim fingers.

"Aye. They're deid." He turned from the girl's paling face and nodded to Taggart and Forester. He would have spoken further, but Taggart, feeling it his duty to dispel the gloom that Graeme's news had spread, spoke up briskly. "An' now here's good news. Friend Graeme's kilt a buffalo, and they's meat fer all a ways back. Some o' the boys better saddle up."

"Meat!" whooped a couple of youths, and they trotted over to the wagon where saddles lay against the hubs. Two older men followed more slowly but with alacrity. Forester, moving alongside the frankly staring women, spoke up.

"We're thankful fer the meat, Graeme. Saves on supplies."

"It does that," gravely agreed the Scot. "How many do you count in the train?"

"Thirty souls," the gray-beard informed him. "Taggart here, he's captain. An' there's my wife and daughter Lisbeth here." He indicated the two women beside him. "Then there's six other families. Twenty-four men and boys, six females. We're aimin' to set up a settlement, fort an' store, to serve the Santa Fe trade that's bound to come."

"Aye," the young Scot nodded, his quick mind agreeing to the possibilities of a wayside post for the trade that he and his partners had found profitable these three years. "But not on this river, I tak' it."

The gray-beard stared, perplexed. His wife and the girl looked sharply at Graeme. But it was Taggart who spoke.

"Why not?" he challenged.

The young Scot eased himself in his saddle, his plaid kilt draping over bare knees, and shook his head. "This is the Cimarron," he pointed out. "A braw stream here, but no so helpfu' farther up. Twa

months frae now, ye'll find the water sinkin' in the sand."

The gray-beard frowned in perplexity, the women looked perturbed. Taggart scowled, and shot a glance at the nearby stream. Evidently the sight of the rushing waters reassured him. "I've trapped up here, an' never saw lack of water. And it's free of Injuns, this river."

"Aye," agreed the Scot calmly. "But ye might conseeder that what an Indian leaves is hardly worth the gleaning. If ye went north, now, by the Arkansas, or south, by the Canadian—"

"And be scalped by the Pawnees, er the Comanches!" snorted Taggart.

The girl, Lisbeth, spoke for the first time. "It's true that the Indians rove on those rivers?"

Graeme bowed. "Aye, ma'am," he admitted. He would have told them more, of how the Pawnees ranged far north except in small bands, and of how the Comanches wintered on the Brazos and seldom rode north except when the tribes made war. But he saw by the doubt in the eyes of the three Foresters that his words would be wasted.

The four meat-seekers rode up, ready and impatient. So Graeme, lifting his bonnet again to Lisbeth Forester and her mother, nodded to the gray-beard and the train captain, and rode the back trail, an odd heaviness within him.

THE four riders from the train were soon on their way. Graeme showed them his own back trail, and one of the oldsters nodded. "I kin foller that, Scotty," he grinned. "Specially when meat's on th' other end." So Graeme left them and turned south.

He caught up with his partners as the dusk of early summer fell upon the grassy slopes. Their campfire twinkled cheerily in the gloom, and a hearty hail from a screen of alders told that the campers were on the alert. He dismounted and picketed his horse, refusing the bay's lunges toward the spring.

No-Scalp Taylor came forward, rifle at ease, and eyed the packet of meat approvingly. "Knew ye'd fix us up," he grunted. "Ary sign of Injun?"

"Aye. I kilt two Crows," Graeme told him. "And hark ye now. A wagon train is camped awa' north on the Cimarron."

"Arrr!" snorted Taylor in disbelief. Victor Arnot, coming from the fire with fork in hand, chuckled. "Wagon train!" he grinned. "Thees Graeme, he's dronk, I theenk, mon ami."

Graeme shook his head soberly. "No, Victor. Six wagons. Twenty-four men and boys, six women."

"Wimmen!" snorted Taylor. The Frenchman's eyes rolled. "By gar!" He cocked his head sidewise and waited for Graeme to tell them more. The Scot loosened his saddle, letting the bay breathe deep, then stripped it off, leaving the blanket to cool the sweating back slowly.

"Thees army tricks!" exclaimed the Frenchman in disgust. "Leave the horse, my friend, and tell us more. Thees wagon train, where does it go?"

"Nowhere," smiled Graeme. "They will build a fort on the Cimarron, to serve us who travel to Santa Fe."

No-Scalp Taylor removed his skin cap and scratched the bright bald head that had won him his nickname. "Mought be a good idee," he muttered, "ef twan't on th' Cimarron." He squinted an eye at the Scot. "Ye told 'em she goes dry?"

Graeme nodded. "I told them," he rejoined dryly, "but they like it because the Injuns won't bother 'em."

ARNOT snorted loudly. "By gar! Nobody will trouble them on the Cimarron. No Indians, no traders, no buffalo. Who would choose a dry river, *hein?* They will dry up, too."

Graeme nodded slowly, thoughtfully, thinking of the slim girl with the dark blue eyes. He left his partners exclaiming while he freed the bay, and slowly limped to the spring. There was a girl, he thought. Aye, a bonny lassie, with the light of the hills in her eyes and a proud swing to her. Of a sudden he remembered the burst of feminine laughter that had greeted his appearance at the wagon train, and he flushed. Could it have been she?

He grinned a little. The women of this land would never guess the pride with which he wore the kilt. Lazily he hunkered to the ground, watching the bay, and fingered the dirk tucked in his gay plaid hose, the dirk that Scots had worn there ever since kilts first came to Scot-

land. He slipped the fur bonnet off his head, laid a loving finger on the clean silver badge—the badge of the Gordons—and lightly brushed the black cock's feather that rose from the fur. Cock o' the North! She couldn't know that he had fought in France, with the Iron Duke, and had charged at the stirrup of a Scots Grey that day they had whipped Boney hard by the spraddling little Flemish town with the quaint name, Waterloo.

He glanced down darkly at the crippled foot, and remembered with the old twinge of sadness the wound that had forced him out of the regiment, out of the army. And him with a lieutenant's commission in his grasp. Lieutenant! Almost he could hear the gay skirl of the pipes and the quick warm thunder of the drums. His lips pursed, and he whistled:

"Cock o' the east, and cock o' the west,
The old black cock is the best—"

He stopped suddenly. She—the girl—knew naught of that. Would she care, then? Durwent Graeme wondered if he'd see her again. Perhaps, when they traveled back from Santa Fe in the fall of the year—

The bay was splashing his head in the spring. He had drunk his fill. Graeme whistled, and the swayback trotted up. The Scot lifted the sagging blanket, felt the warm back with critical palm, and slipped the blanket off. The bay ambled to the picket line, where two saddle horses and the *atajo,* twenty pack mules, grazed.

Savory odors rose from the little fire. Taylor looked up. "Steak's ready, boy. Roll up—and while ye eat, tell us about them wagons."

"*Oui,* describe thees foolish ones," begged Arnot. "And mos' especially, the ladees."

Graeme laughed. "The wagons are the big ones, mule-drawn. Of the ladies I saw but two. And one, my Victor, was married."

"It is of no moment," retorted Victor airily. He scowled suddenly. "Who leads them, that they are so lost?"

Graeme frowned.

"A big man, Taggart. He says he has trapped on the Cimarron."

"Ha! Trapped—on the Cimarron! The prairie dog, then—or perhaps the coyote? He has not such beauties as we carry to Santa Fe, no?"

Taylor grunted in satisfaction. "We shore got 'em this time. Finest pelts I ever toted. Marten and otter, an' them foxes'll bring many a Spanish dollar." He munched a morsel of buffalo steak with relish.

"The foxes are bonny skins," Graeme agreed. "Belike they'll go all the way to Madrid, and gentle folk will wear them at court."

Victor nodded while Taylor eyed them both. "My faith, yes," the Frenchman agreed. "Let the men from the east carry cloth and the hardware to the Mexico station. We, the men from the north, the Canadas, will take the rare stuff, the furs."

"What d'ye mean, Canadians!" snorted Taylor. "I'm Kentucky, I am!"

"But the frost of Canada is in your ears," grinned Graeme, while the Frenchman chuckled.

"It'll thaw out soon," grunted Taylor. He gestured largely. "Bet we'll be fust into Santa Fe this summer. And git th' top prices."

His comrades agreed, though no men west of the Great River knew better than they how many feathered ambuscades lay between them and their goal.

TWO days westing found the trio and their *atajo* on the north bank of the Canadian, forging through rich green grass and leafing alder and cottonwood. Game was plentiful near the river. Buffalo roamed where the grass grew high near the river, and the choosey hunters scorned the fleeting antelope that with its coarse flesh offered little in return for a cartridge. Once Graeme shot a bighorn, and the racy venison afforded a welcome change from buffalo steak.

It was while he rode back to camp, circling a bluff, carcass on cantle, that he came upon the trail of the redskin.

The Indians had forded the river where the stream ran broad and shallow, going north. The new grass was crushed where they had taken up the trail. Countless hoofs had trod the bank, and over their marks lay the track of poles. Indian drags. The pony-drawn drags that bore squaws and papooses. A whole Indian nation was on the march!

Graeme studied the sign with narrowed eyes, calculating swiftly. The tribe was moving north—and if the wagon train on the Cimarron had kept to its schedule, there would be a meeting. A coming together of tribe and little wagon train, on the cursed river where no help was near for the whites.

He gave the bay no respite as he rode back to camp. Jerking the bighorn carcass off his saddle, he ignored the admiring comment of his partners, and blurted out the news of the tribe's march.

Taylor scratched his chin. "North, hey? Kinda early fer any o' the southern tribes t' be movin'. Not Comanches—th' lazy skunks is still on the Brazos, er I'm a gray wolf. More Crows, mebbe?"

Arnot nodded slowly. "Perhaps the Arapahoes. We will keep the good watch, my friends."

Graeme saw that neither had read his mind. "I'm thinking the red people will cross the Cimarron nigh the camp of that wagon train."

"Say!" Taylor exclaimed. "Never thought o' that." He eyed Graeme and Arnot in turn, and shrugged. "Guess they's nuthin' we kin do."

Arnot shrugged.

Graeme had calculated. "The Cimarron would not be far."

"Say, thutty mile." Taylor eyed Graeme. "Had ye an idee, now?"

"The tribe would be traveling slowly." The young Scot squinted in thought. "And the sign was fresh. We could warn the wagon train in time, I mak' no doubt."

"An' leave th' furs?" asked Taylor, scandalized. Arnot said nothing, but he cast an uneasy glance at their worldly goods, swaying on the backs of the patient mules.

"True," said Graeme. "We could not take the *atajo,* and still ride fast enough. Do you two, then, stay, and I will ride to warn those on the Cimarron."

Taylor fidgeted. "We'd like well to go with ye, lad," he murmured. And Arnot muttered quick agreement.

"No," said Graeme. "Wait ye here. Forbye the tribe has passed on and left the train unharmed, ye'll see me this night." He mounted, and grinned mildly at them.

"And if it hain't?" asked Taylor morosely.

"Then," said Graeme cheerfully, "ye may see me later, or e'en not at all." He waved to both, set spurs to the bay, and rode north.

THE going was rough, and Graeme, to make sure that he would clear the flanking riders of the tribe, circled widely. Two hours had gone before he topped the last rise below the Cimarron, and here he halted. Keening his eyes, he searched the horizon to the west. There was no sight of moving things there.

But far in the distance a thin haze lay. The sight of it quickened his pulse. No, it was not heat haze, nor dust whipped up by the breeze. It was the wake of the Indian nation, moving on the Cimarron.

He waited for no more. Down the slope to the river he sent the bay, slipping over sandy cuts and shale. He forded the river where the water rose to his stirrups, and spurred the bay along the farther bank, seeking sign of the wagon train.

His heart lifted a little when he found no tracks in the sand, and he turned down the stream. But he had gone only four miles or so when he heard the ringing thud of axes on wood, and sharper crack of bull-whips. He had found the train.

And the train, it seemed, had found its destination. For as he swept around an alder-screened bend he saw a half-formed log stockade, with stout posts standing in an almost completed circle, and a few of them buttressed with split planks wooden-pegged into the upright peeled logs. Teams of mules were hauling other logs to the enclosure, and men toiled to erect platforms behind the wall.

The giant Taggart, supervising operations from his saddle, was first to spy Graeme. He waved cheerily.

"Hi, Scotty!" he cried as Graeme rode his weary bay up to the wall, "how does it look to you?"

"Guid, but none too guid," the young Scot drawled grimly. "Taggart, an Indian nation is moving this way."

The giant's grin left his face in a flash. He scowled. "What's that ye say?"

Graeme nodded slowly. "I saw their mark on the bank of the Canadian," he said. "I've ridden thirty miles to warn you."

Taggart scowled thunderously. Hesitat-

ing, he asked, "Ye think they'll attack us?"

Graeme, too, hesitated, but not for long. "Belike," he affirmed. "Gin they plan war on anither tribe, or yet hae no thought but hunting, they will covet powder, which no doubt ye have."

Taggart lost countenance, and looked at the ground. "None too much," he muttered. He looked around at the toiling builders. "We'd best make all secure, hey?"

"A guid plan," Graeme agreed. "All are in camp?"

"Every man jack, and the women, too." Taggart eyed the Scot's long Kentucky rifle hungrily. "Ye'll stay?"

Graeme nodded. He followed a subdued Taggart around the enclosure, keenly noting weaknesses in the wall, as Taggart spoke first to the teamsters.

"Cracky!" gasped a lanky muleskinner, slack-jawed. He dropped his reins. "Lemme get my gun!"

Graeme spoke sharply. "Ye have some hours to work. These logs will be vast help."

The teamster glanced from the Scot to the bearded train captain, who scowled and nodded. The lanky man picked up his reins, with a furtive glance behind him, and drove the team to the task of pulling the log toward the wall.

They made the circuit, Taggart and the calm Scot, and the giant turned to Graeme. "Now what, Scotty?"

"Water," returned Graeme. "If ye'll have no spring inside the fort, then ye must store it. All ye can. 'Twill serve if need be to quench the flames set by the bur-rning arrows."

"Ah!" grunted Taggart, wincing. He led the way inside.

The word spread quickly. Men came up to Graeme, asking eager questions, the light of excitement and a half-formed fear in their eyes. "Where? Where were they? What tribe?"

"I dinna ken," said Graeme. "But they'll pass by, or halt, as they choose. And we must be ready." He tethered his bay in the shelter of a wagon, advising others to do the same, and soon the enclosure was alive with hurrying men leading horses and mules. The wagons were drawn up to block the gaps in the stockade, and soon the circle was complete.

Graeme, gloomily contemplating that circle, was counting the odds against the little party when a light touch of his arm made him turn.

It was the girl. Her sunbonnet was off now, and her fair hair streamed over her shoulders like nodding heather. Her eyes were dark with concern, but Graeme saw no fear there.

"They are coming?" she asked.

"They are coming this way," he assented.

"You saw them?"

He shook his head. "I saw their trail. I was camped on the Canadian with my partners."

She looked over her shoulder, and spoke low. "We should have settled on the Canadian."

It was not a question, but rather an acceptance of the judgment he had offered days before. And the faith in her eyes confirmed her words. She had been thinking of him, then. He flushed.

"It's no so easy to say, ma'am. Forbye the tribe passes on, ye may be safe some time. Yet the Canadian is a better trade route."

She eyed him calmly. "You traveled far to warn us."

"Aye. Thirty miles."

"Why?"

He flushed, looked down, and drew the toe of his moccasin in the dirt of the stockade floor. Then, looking up, he met her gaze levelly. "I am a Scot, ma'am. And we of the hielands speak plain. It was yersel', Miss Lisbeth, I had in mind." He hefted his rifle into the crook of his arm, avoiding her gaze now, and muttered, "I'll be riding now, to scout the tribe." And he strode off, leaving her standing, her finger-tips pressed to flaming cheeks.

To Taggart he only said, "They must be near. I'll ride to scout them." And when the giant demurred, hinting of danger, Graeme laughed. "Three times I've ridden through them to Santa Fe, and three times returned. Ye'll see me in the hour." He flung a leg over the bay and threaded through the wagon-blanketed entrance.

HE rode cautiously, well knowing the danger of meeting a party of roving braves, but he saw no sign of the marching

tribe until he had crossed two ridges. Then he gasped at the sight before him.

Five hundred tepees covered the whole valley to the south of the ridge. He could not see the ground, so numerous and thickly set were the skin wigwams. And in the lower end of the valley, where water must lie if the stretch of woods did not deceive, thousands of horses roamed on the grass.

A whole nation was on the move.

Graeme waited for no more. Riding swiftly, yet wary of a sudden flank attack, he spurred back to the fort. Taggart and Forester he told of his discovery.

They stood aghast. Forester turned on his train captain with recrimination in mind. Then, sensing the futility of it, he turned back to Graeme, trembling with concern and eagerness.

"Ef we skin out of this alive," he said simply, "I'll take any heed ye give me as fer where I should raise my store. But what do we do fer now?"

"Ca' canny," said Graeme. When the two wrinkled their brows at that he grinned. "It's Scots for the cautious way. We can only stay close, offer no provocation, and hope they pass with no hostility. Rifles at the palisade—but no shooting!"

Taggart's rumbling voice gave agreement. "I passed th' word," he said, "but them youngsters—"

Crack! A rifle sounded at the wall. Taggart and Forester whirled. Graeme said softly, "Ah! The peety o't," and plucked his rifle up.

From all corners of the stockade cries resounded. A woman screamed. Forester blanched. "You mean—"

Taggart swore. "Sounds like the beginning."

"And mayhap the end," added Graeme gently.

A YOUNG rifleman had been watching on the wall. Warned to hold his fire, he sat on the platform and trembled when a buck rode into sight. But he held his fire—until the buck brandished his own firearms with a defiant whoop. That was too much for the boy sentry. His shot had shattered the buck's arm, and the shrill menacing whoop that followed stopped the pulse of every white in the stockade.

Graeme leaped to the wall. He saw the buck ride into the cover of the alders by the river. He had only a glimpse of the painted body, slicked hair feathered, but his sharp ejaculation was heard by Forester and Taggart. "Crow, hey?" repeated Taggart. "They can be hard to beat."

"And plenty of 'em," added Forester grimly.

Graeme turned thoughtfully. "How many guns here?"

"Twenty-four—and your own," said Forester. "An' a few hoss pistols that the women kin use."

Graeme nodded slowly. "Twenty-five guns—against the thousands out there." He glanced up at the sky. "They'll attack soon," he warned the train leaders. "Once that buck gets back to camp, there'll be hundreds of yon savages before us." He eyed the lengthening shadows, and scowled. "We can beat off their first attack, but they'll come back—perhaps with every brave in camp." He sighed. "If we're not surrounded when night falls, I'll be takin' my leave."

The two whirled on him. "Leave?" choked Forester. And Taggart growled, "Runnin' out?"

"Who's running?" asked a clear voice.

Unnoticed, Lisbeth Forester had come up. Now she stood looking from one to another of the three, puzzled.

Graeme spoke quietly. "It's I must leave, ma'am." He jerked his head southward. "I've two partners on the Canadian, and there may be other trading parties who can ride to help this fort."

Taggart digested this argument, emitted a vast snort, and turned on his heel. Forester, with a frosty look at Graeme, followed more slowly.

The girl watched them go. Then she studied the face of the young Scot. He met her searching look fairly. And finally she spoke.

"I believe you will do well by us," she said simply.

With an impulse that came from he knew not where, he took her hand. "That I shall, Lisbeth," he said low-voiced. "I could not leave you did I not see it best."

She nodded, and released her hand from his shyly. "You are a Scot," she mused.

Though all about them the hurry of battle preparation sounded, he grinned

suddenly. "'Twas you, mayhap, who laughed when first I came to camp."

She colored. "Yes," she said faintly. "I—I couldn't help it. I never saw a—a petticoated man before."

He chuckled. "Nor this?" he asked, taking off his bonnet and displaying the badge proudly. "Tis the badge of the Gordons."

"Ah!" Her breath came fast. "I read an account of the Waterloo fight—how the Gordons charged at the Grey's stirrups, the sooner to get into the fight!"

"Did ye, now!" He beamed delightedly.

Off in the dusk, a rifle cracked. On the heels of the sound came a thundering chorus of whoops, flooding the enclosure and all the valley with horrid sound. The attack had come.

SWIFTLY Graeme put the girl from him, and started for the platform. She followed. "I can load for you," she offered.

"Nay, nay. Do you seek your father."

She flushed. "Or Jim Taggart? I am half promised to him."

He whirled, his face dark. "Ye'd wed him, gir-rl?" he cried harshly.

Startled by his tone, she shrank back. In a moment she was lost in the shadows of the wall. Nor had Graeme time to strain his eyes for her. Over the brow of the western hill a swarm of horsemen came, whooping and firing as they came. And from the shaly mesa to the north they charged down. Graeme had only time to note that no attack came from the east or from the river side, where the ground was open and offered no cover for surprise tactics. Then he was firing.

He picked his man with every shot. And all along the line, all but the boys were firing cool and steady. From the west the thundering horsemen, dim in the dusk, had hardly cleared the ridge when Taggart's rifle took toll, and a pony squealed in sudden agony, hurtling to the ground and throwing confusion into the charge. Graeme's shot spilled a brave from his saddle, and now a half dozen bullets found their mark in that close-packed rank. Thirty paces from the stockade, the charge broke. Wheeling to right or left, the redskins broke.

But the second attack, from the shale on the north, now struck. The fort defenders, clasping their hot rifles, turned and met the new threat, hurling it back. An Indian yelled in his death agony, and Graeme cocked his ears at the sound. "Arapaho!" he muttered, and shook his head. Crows and Arapahoes, too, speaking dialects of the same language, and allied in this deadly attack. He began to make his plans for his escape.

The attack from the north was brief and quickly discouraged. But Graeme knew that it would be renewed, bitterly and with patient cunning. There would be no fire arrows, for the flame of them would betray the bowmen. Nor would the redskins attempt to scale the walls by night. No, it was the dawn he had to fear.

He sought out Forester. "How goes the powder?" he asked.

The storekeeper shook his head, but Taggart, who had come up, growled, "It's half gone a'ready."

Graeme nodded. "My partners carry plenty. If I can get through, there'll be powder for the dawn attack."

Forester nodded eagerly, and even Taggart's surly glance held less of suspicion and scorn that Graeme had seen in it when he had first revealed his plan.

"When ye pullin' out?" asked Forester.

"Now," the young Scot replied calmly. "They've pulled off. Won't be back for an hour, forbye the night. Nor will they keep close watch. Taggart, ye'll cover my going?"

"I'll do that," growled Taggart. "Ef the varmints try t' ketch yuh outside th' wall, jest holler and we'll toss lead whar it'll do th' most good."

Graeme's heart sank at the thought of the punishment the bay would take. But he knew the stout heart in the sway-backed beauty, and there was no help for it the noo. He wrapped the horse's hoofs in rags to muffle the sound of his movement, and walked with Taggart and Forester to the gate. They shook hands silently, and Graeme turned away. But another hand touched his arm. It was Lisbeth.

"Oh, come back, my Scot!" she cried softly, her hand on his.

In the dim light her face was upturned, her eyes misty pools of light. He bent, and softly touched his lips to her warm mouth. She trembled, but her hands came

up, and the tingling touch of her fingertips took his breath away. Quickly he turned, without a word, and slipped through the gate.

The night was empty. Not a sound crossed the sandy bottom. He led the bay east along the river for a mile. No challenge came from the dark. And when the fort lay well behind, he put the bay to the river.

It was deep at this haphazard crossing, but the bay swam vigorously, and he drifted with a hand on the saddlehorn, kicking free of the swimming horse. He emerged on gravel, and was thankful for the rags that still covered the bay's hoofs.

The clouds scattered, and by starlight he threaded the canyons south of the Cimarron. Before midnight he was on the Canadian.

His partners' camp was cold.

THEY had shoved west, he knew. There was nothing for it but to follow. And follow he did, for another hour. He was led to the new camp by the snort of a pack mule, asleep and dreaming of oats in a warm Santa Fe stall. Leading the bay, he approached the camp, drawing up at the drawled, "Halt, thar, an' speak yer piece!" of No-Scalp Taylor.

"It's Graeme," called the young Scot, and immediately the old Kentuckian whooped in relief.

"Hey, Victor!" he shouted. "Th' kid's back! Wal, what news, boy?"

The Frenchman tumbled sleepily from his blankets. Briefly Graeme described the plight of the wagon train in their raw fort.

Taylor shook his head, frowning. "Crows and Arapahoes, hey? That sounds bad."

"You've seen no other pack trains going in to Santa Fe?"

No-Scalp shook his head. "Too early. We're ahead o' the parade." He stirred, glanced at the Frenchman in the light of the fire he had quickly kindled. "Wal, Victor?"

"For sure, let us ride," quickly agreed Arnot. "You would have it so, Durwent?"

Graeme nodded. "Let's take the mules," he suggested.

Taylor scratched his head. "Mought's well," he agreed. "They ain't no good to us here ef we git our come-uppance on the Cimarron."

They broke camp quickly, caching their furs, and shifting a small powder keg to each saddle. The remainder of their store of powder went onto the backs of the mules, and they were ready.

The trail north was easier to find here. Half an hour after they started they hit the course of the Indian march. A few minutes later Arnot, who had been studying the ground, uttered a sharp exclamation, and pointed to the ground, clear in the starlight.

New tracks had come in to the crush of the trampled trail at one point. Arnot rode a short way back, and rejoined his two partners with a gleam in his eye.

"Shod hoofs," he exclaimed. "Sixteen horses in the party."

"Whites," muttered Taylor. "Now, who kin thet be?"

The three found the answer to that question two miles south of the Cimarron. In a little gully between two rocky ridges the starlight glinted on a saber. The scudding clouds just then cleared away, and the full white light of the moon picked out a score of blue-clad figures asprawl on the slope in sleeping postures.

"Whee!" cried Taylor, exultantly. "Dragoons! United States Cavalry, by gosh! Now we'll give them redskins hell!"

"My faith, yes!" yelled Arnot. "Now we—"

Suddenly he fell silent. He shot a quick glance at the silent Graeme, and Taylor leaned forward, staring, his breath caught in his throat. The three dismounted and hurried forward.

In the softly waving grass, seventeen dragoons lay sprawled in death. Here a man lay on his back, sightless eyes staring at the sky. There another lay face down, his cheek against his hand. And something darkly red glistened where the hair was shorn from the crown of his head.

"By gar!" breathed Arnot.

Taylor, with a long look around, breathed unevenly. "Wiped out," he muttered.

Graeme had found the officer, a young lieutenant, shot through the forehead and scalped. He fingered the pockets of the blue coat and found a slip of paper. Smoothing it out, he read it. To his companions who came up he said then, "They were on the Crows' trail. Just this

half-troop. No other patrols were sent out."

Taylor said heavily, "Thet leaves it up to us."

ARNOT sat down abruptly, covering his face.

Taylor took off his hat. "Them soldier boys kilt a few," he remarked grimly, pointing to the far end of the gully. There, sure enough, lay painted bodies. As Graeme's eye roved over the scene he saw more, half hidden behind the high grass. Fifty or more.

"They fought well," he muttered. "But they were surprised."

"Yep," agreed Taylor. "The devils caught 'em between the ridges here, and poured it in."

Graeme suddenly slapped his thigh. "Mon!" he exclaimed. "Yon puir laddies can help us now."

Taylor stared, and the Frenchman crossed himself. "Boy, are ye clean loony?" cried Taylor. "They're dead."

"Aye," assented Graeme. "And I wadna disturb their sleep. But we hae a job to do."

Taylor scowled. "What kin we do, now?"

Graeme smiled. "You forget Scotch cunning."

The Frenchman looked up, glancing bright-eyed at Graeme.

"We'll tak' the uniforms, d'ye see," explained Graeme, "and stuff them with poles and whatever, and set them on the pack mules. Then we will lead them on a far hill, within sight of the tribe."

Taylor wrinkled his forehead. "They's on'y a few," he demurred.

"Aye," agreed the Scot. "But d'ye see, when the Indians see them, they'll be hundreds."

The Frenchman stared, and Taylor blinked.

"How?" he asked.

Graeme smiled briefly. "It's a trick Napoleon tried at Gibraltar," he explained. "He sailed his fleet past the great fort. Then over the horizon, circling—and sailed the same ships past the fort. To mak' the English garrison think he had twice the number or even more."

"Cracky!" Taylor exclaimed. "Thet Napoleon, he was smart."

"By gar!" exclaimed Arnot. "She's a good plan, that one!"

A good plan, but a hard one to carry out. The three strained over their work of constructing dummies to sit firmly on the pack mules. Finally all was ready. Then Graeme, striding among the dead Crows, selected a bow and a quiver of arrows.

Taylor's glance asked a question.

"Do you two ride with the mules," explained Graeme, "whiles I skirt the south end of the Indian camp. A few arrows with short fuses and paper cartridges of powder among those tepees, and the fire will sweep the tribe's camp. Perhaps at the moment that we wish."

Taylor grinned. "By cracky, ye shore mean to stir 'em up. Wal, it'll larn 'em. An' mebbe as ye say they'll pull off when they see their camp in smoke. Which way do we go?"

"There's a high ridge," said Graeme, "south of the fort, on the south side of the Cimarron. Do you ride on the eastern slope, show the cavalry file at a gap between cover, then circle and show the mules and their blue riders again and yet again. I will be firing the savages' camp."

"Bon chance!" cried Arnot. Taylor waved. And the two were off, kicking the mules who were inclined to balk at their unwieldy burdens. For on each of sixteen packs a stiff figure in blue, with the peaked forage cap of the United States Cavalry jutting above, swayed with the mules' walk. Graeme watched them go. Surely a stranger forlorn chance never had taken the war trail.

HE approached the camp cautiously, down wind. His bow was ready at his pommel, the quiver slung from the saddlehorn. When he found the spot where the rocky cover lay nearest to the tepees, he dismounted and tethered his horse. Then, prone, he snaked forward, dragging his bow and quiver. The breeze was coming up strong, he noted with satisfaction. The wind would sweep the fire through the camp from end to end.

Carefully he gauged the range. Then he fitted an arrow, with a powder cartridge tied behind its point, to his bow, struck flint and steel and lit the fuse. As the dampened powder spluttered he stretched

the bow and let the thirty-inch shaft fly.

It struck a tepee, its point piercing the skin, and clung there, smoking. Suddenly the cartridge flamed with a plop. Graeme swiftly dispatched another shaft, and another. He waited but a moment, satisfied with his work, then began to snake back to his horse.

He was within ten yards when a painted brave moved out of a clump of alder. The Indian, astonished, narrowed his eyes. Graeme tensed. Then the brave, with a grunt, reached for the knife in his belt, and sprang.

Graeme spared one thought for the rifle at his saddle-bow, then he brought up the bow and with a flick of the wrist whipped an arrow from his quiver. He fitted it instinctively, and loosed it straight at the redskin's yellow-daubed heaving chest. The shaft took the brave full in the throat. The redskin clawed the air, and fell, twitching.

Graeme ran then. Caught up his horse, swung into the saddle, glimpsed the curling flames that lifted from three tepees, and rode. The bay began to heave wheezily, but Graeme was merciless.

He found the partners and the "cavalry" huddled in the lee of the ridge. To the north he could glimpse the fort, dim in the false dawn.

"They hain't seen us yit," grunted Taylor. "How'd it be if we try fer th' fort?"

Graeme looked toward the Indian camp, which he had circled on his retreat. "Too late," he demurred, and pointed.

A dozen braves were riding along the south bank of the Cimarron, keeping safely out of range of the stockade's guns. Taylor reached for his rifle, glancing inquiringly at Graeme. The Scot nodded, and Taylor leveled his long gun, took careful aim, and fired.

One of the leading braves lurched on his pony, threw up an arm and tumbled to the sand. The others reined in, looking up to the ridge. With yells of anger they spurred up the slope. Calmly Arnot dropped one. Graeme brought his rifle into play and the third fell, crawling to cover, but collapsing before he reached the bush.

The others drew rein, parleyed, then rode off. "They'll git help," grunted Taylor anxiously.

"Show them the troops!" yelled Graeme. And they led the mules to the gap. When out of the ravines to the west a party of fifty yelling braves appeared, Taylor sighed. "Wal here goes! Come on, ye lop-ears!" And he led the mules into the gap.

The astonished Indians hauled their mounts back on their haunches. Animatedly they conversed. Graeme silently thanked the poor light of the false dawn for the deception that would never have succeeded otherwise.

The Indians sat their saddles, watching. And Taylor and Arnot led the mules down the slope, circling, and past the gap again. Until the amazed Indians had counted sixteen troopers, and sixteen more, and still another party of the same number.

They yelled in baffled rage and spurred in retreat. But back they came, two hundred strong. Charging without pause.

GRAEME, anxiously studying the western sky for the glow of fire, turned to Taylor and Arnot. "We'll charge," he said.

"What!" gasped Taylor. Arnot rubbed his chin speculatively.

"They won't like it," Graeme promised. "They'll break the noo. First, we'll drop a few." And he took up his rifle in the face of that wildly charging horde.

Unerring fire from the three rifles thinned the rank of charging Crows. Fifty paces away, they wheeled to right and left to retire and re-form. It was then that a thin howl rose from their rear.

"They've smelt them hide tepees a-burnin'," chuckled Taylor.

"Now!" cried Graeme.

They charged, Graeme and Taylor and Arnot and the ghost cavalry.

Graeme led the first line of mules. Would the redskins wonder, seeing cavalry on muleback? The Scot prayed that they would not suspect a ruse.

In the dim light the redskins saw a charging rank on the skyline. They saw blue uniforms of a pattern that they knew and feared. But they stubbornly held their ground.

The lump grew in Graeme's throat. Would he live to see Lisbeth Forester again? Would she live another day?

Taylor yelled. And from a ravine more

cavalry followed his rush. Three rifles spoke.

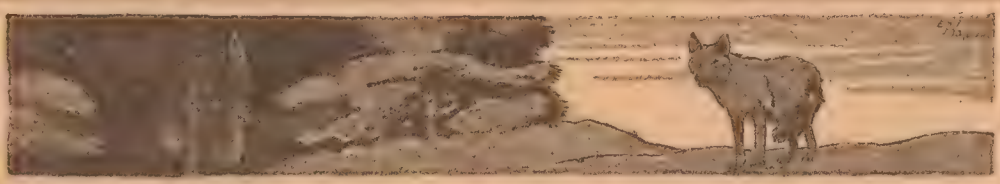
Then came Arnot, eight mules trotting behind him.

The redskins broke. In their minds was the thought of their burning camp, and before them was this charging host, coming down the slope. They stayed only to loose a few spiteful shots, and rode, west, away from the tough nut on the Cimarron.

The fort folk cheered as the thin file turned into the gate. Cheered until they saw what sort of cavalry rode behind Graeme and his partners. Then they fell silent, amazed and gave the three their silent handclasps.

Only Lisbeth Forester spoke. "You've come back, Scot. If you must go again, let me go with you."

And Graeme looking into her eyes, knew that she would be one whom he would wish to have beside him always.



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Scourge of the Sagebrush

By EDGAR L. COOPER

The grim rider raced the death wind. But the breeze and its whisper, "Five thousand dollars for the Sabine Kid!" caught him at Six-Shooter Bend, where five thousand would build an owlhoot empire.

BLUE dusk was sifting over the Brazos bottomlands when the Kid kneed his black-maned buckskin across the shallow sandbar ford at Six-Shooter Bend, and headed upslope toward where a huddle of buildings topped a post-oak flat. Drood's dump, that would be. Known far and wide along the highline as purveyor—for a high price—to outlawry.

The cottonwoods of the bottom loomed white as ghosts in that hour of owl-light, and whippoorwills were beginning their plaintive calls. The Kid, eyes and senses alert, rode warily, his gaze raking the

murky thickets. In his game one never knew when he would ride into set ambush, and of late the odds against him were building up. So he kept his buckskin at a slow walk, and dusk had faded into the creeping black of night when at last he topped the bluff and saw the dim yellow light of Drood's store-saloon yonder through the trees.

He ought to be safe enough there for two, three days, the Kid reflected grimly. He had the dinero to pay for that safety.

Walking his cat-hammed pony noiselessly, he headed toward the dump, angling a little to where a fire burned brightly in an oak motte, cutting a bright orange splash against the dark. Figures moved about it, and its glow shone dimly on two big wagons parked hard by. The thin wail of a child came to his ears, mingling with the whiney yelp of a hound. And as the Kid drew nearer, he suddenly reined up his buckskin in the shadows, staring narrow-eyed.

No mistaking that outfit, whatever. The same Mitchell wagon, feed boxes on the side, with the new red wheel. Hind wheel. Hauled by a stocking-foot sorrel and mouse-hued mule. The same pilgrim immigrants that he, Kid Sabine, had happened across three days ago just this side of Hobb's crossing on the Trinity. Bound West with the spring—just as he was. A lean scarecrow of a man in homespun at the reins, and a girl in red gingham and poke bonnet on the seat beside him.

A girl who had looked at Sabine beneath dark lashes, a corner of her red mouth quirking, when he'd swung alongside the Mitchell in unhurried gait and saluted the suspicious driver with his quirt. For a moment or so they'd made small talk, then at the patent hostility of the hillbilly the Kid had loped on, leaving the girl staring after his slim, dark good-lookingness.

Three days ago. And now—what in hell and high-water were they doing here at Drood's, way off the beaten trail, camped at the toughest joint between the Sabine and the Guadalupe? The Kid's eyes grew narrower as he turned the thought over in his mind, wondering.

A gaunt woman with snuff-stick in mouth bent over the blaze, busy with pot and skillet. The shikepoke wagoner sat on the Mitchell's tongue, mending a piece of harness. Voices of another man and woman came from the shadows of the far wagon, where the kid was crying fretfully. But it was the girl, coming just then from the wall of darkness that the bright fire had built, who instantly caught and held Sabine's gaze.

Lithe, Indian-straight, her dress unbuttoned at the throat and collar turned in to reveal her firmly perfect neck. Sleeves rolled high on rounded arms, in her hands a tray of biscuit dough for the Dutch oven. A girl whose hair glinted like catclaw honey in the firelight, and whose eyes the Kid knew were the color of Texas bluebonnets in spring. A barelegged, barearmed girl, who walked as if she moved to the strains of some secret, lilty refrain deep inside her . . .

One of the staked hounds suddenly raised a yowl, nose pointed toward the watching horseman. Others joined, and the man mending the harness peered into the dark sharply. The Kid eased his pony off on noiseless hoofs, the dark, lean lines of his face set in a scowl. Hearing the girl say something in a remembered, throaty voice, and the snuff-dipping woman's petulant answer as he rode away.

Rode toward Drood's, yonder where that yellow light shone. And thinking that there was a damned black nigger in the woodpile, here at Six-Shooter Bend on River Brazos.

Staking out his pony in an adjacent hackberry clump, the Kid walked swiftly to the open store entrance. Several horses were at the worn hitchrack, and voices clashed inside. Five men hunkered around a spread blanket on the puncheon floor, shooting dice. Drood, alone at the bar with elbows on top and a cheroot in his harelipped mouth, was first to see the newcomer as he stepped into the door's light.

A STRANGER who stood just before the threshold, regarding the room in silence. A dark, slender youngster ridden down to leanness, hatbrim tilted low over narrow black eyes, thumb belt-hooked not far from the black butt of the gun thonged low against his thigh. There was something about his slow stare over the room and its occupants, something in the very stance of him there, which suggested a

lobo looking over a coyote pack sniffing about bones.

A wolf lean with hunger, maybe, but of no mind for such stingy pickings as those the meaner varmints about the blanket bickered over . . .

"Harelip" Drood, gross, bull-necked and with the features of a baboon, started as his eyes spotted the newcomer. Started, stared hard, then took the stinking cheroot from his disfigured mouth with a grimace meant to be a welcoming grin.

"Come right in, stranger," he boomed, his greeting scarce understandable because of his infirmity. "Belly right up an' name yore pizen. First'n's allus on the house here at Jake Drood's, yessir."

Sabine nodded, and his step was soft, prowly and sure as he went to the bar, aware that every eye in the suddenly silent place was focused on him. But beyond that first flashing survey and short nod, he paid the crap-shooters no attention. He knew none of them.

"Likker," he told Drood briefly. "No rotgut. I can get grub, and found for my horse here, reckon?"

"Shore can." Drood shoved out bottle and glass. "Git most airy thing yuh want, here at Jake Drood's. I'm him, stranger."

And as Sabine poured his drink, Harelip asked: "What didja say you call yoreself?"

"One of the Jones boys." The Kid drained his glass, set it down. "Who belongs to that wagon outfit down on the flat?"

"Them?" Drood leered hideously. "Hell. A mess uh pilgrims on the travel, frum Tennessee or some'rs. Bound down Refugio way tuh squat, heered. Driv in this evenin', sorter late. Yuh needn't worry none 'bout *them,* Mister Jones, they air plumb harmless. Dam' charcoal burners frum the forks of the crick, way back yonder. Shorthorns from back to who laid the chunk."

"Kinda off the Refugio trail, ain't they?"

"Some." Still grinning, Drood winked meaningly at Sabine. "Li'l' things like that'll happen, look like. Easy tuh git lost hereabouts. Have another'n, friend. That there's Prairie Tan licker."

"Directly, maybe." Sabine turned, hitching up his belt. Glanced briefly at a saddle-warped oldster snoozing in a chair against the back wall, head bent sideways. "May want to lay over a day or two, Drood. I'll tend to my cayuse now, while you rustle me a mess of grub. Okay?"

"Shore. Fix yuh right up, friend Jones. Jest leave it tuh Drood."

Accompanied by a pock-pitted youth whom Drood summoned to show him grain and fodder, Sabine went out. And as they melted toward the gloom of the corrals Harelip turned from the door, looking at the crap-shooters who in turn were staring at him questioningly.

"Anybody know him?" Harelip asked abruptly.

They shook their heads; no. Drood, gnawing his cheroot and scowling, looked around as a swart, beady-eyed youngster entered the room from a rear door. A scrawny, vicious-faced youth whose gait was like the sideling motion of a crab, whose unclean person reeked with the stale fumes of marihuana. He walked to the bar end with Drood.

"Dunno where he come from," said the youth. "Jest popped up, that's all. Forkin' a prime buckskin with black mane an' tail; light cantle roll an' saddle gunned. Likely got a posse fannin' his hocks."

"Mebbe." Drood screwed up his apish visage. "Looks salty enuf. Could happen he totes a roll uh long green, an' he figgers layin' over a spell. You keep yore eyes an' years peeled, Tump, hear me? That there name uh Jones covers a hull hell-slue of folks, yeh."

"Yeh," grinned Tump. "Where's Flip? Still hangin' round that nester filly down yonder? Primin' the play fer tonight?

"Don't know," growled Drood. "Ain't seen him fer a spell. He'll have his bunch in here tereckly, though. All four of 'em. He worked up this here play—reckon he'll take the big cut. Hell agin, yeh."

"Big cut—*an'* the filly!" chuckled Tump evilly. "Gimme a drink."

Muttering curses, Drood lumbered behind the bar. And neither he nor his henchman Tump saw that grizzled figure in the rawhide-bottomed chair tilted against the back wall, head sideways and mouth open in the apparent easy-napping of aging years, slowly part his lids a bare slit for cold, slate-hued eyes to briefly rest upon the two.

Just as those same lids had parted at

Sabine's entrance a few minutes past. Jerky Rabb, scar-faced old warthog of the highline, was no more asleep than a gray lobo sleeps curled in covert. But the Sabine Kid, or Drood and Tump, didn't know that. There were a good many things no one savveyed about old Jerky Rabb, who was at that moment communing dryly with himself.

"One of the Jones boys, huh? I've seen a whole cavvy of that Jones tribe in my day, from Saskatchewan to Sonora, an I c'n count the ones of 'em that didn't belong to the quick-six brotherhood without usin' one of them there Chinee addin' dinguses to do it, too."

He opened his eyes, blinked sleepily.. "Kid Sabine, huh? Knowed him the minute I lay eye on him. All five thousand dollars worth! . . ."

No one in the room heard Jerky's soft chuckle as he heaved out of his chair, and wended a slightly unsteady route toward the bar.

II

SUPPER finished, the Kid busied himself outside for quite a bit of time, prowling to get the lay of things. Unknown to the others, he moved his pony from the corral to a convenient blackjack covert some two hundred yards distant. His soogan he cached in a sheltered gully nearby. When Sabine chose to lair up he was regular Apache at the art, and his prime rule was to sleep light and trust nobody.

Slowly he walked back to Drood's, circling the long way as if he'd been taking an aimless stroll. His gaze rested upon the campfire in the motte, the dim figures hunkered about it. And he reflected wryly that there ought to be a law against tenderfoot shorthorns going on the loose in a country like this. Easy prey to every jackal that haunted the wagon trails—just chicken pie.

And as he speculated just what the play would be about them, standing there in the dark of the bluff flat, a faint thread of wind came out of the west, whispering through cedar and live oak, carrying on its breath the far-away tang of distant prairieland. Like a summons it was to Kid Sabine; and like a hunting wolf he unconsciously raised his head, nostrils dilating to that old, remembered smell of sage and buckbrush and distances. Every nerve of him answering to a call he heard and understood. West Texas, the plateau country, home—

Home! . . . to him, Lee Kirby, pariah and paisano. And the trail that led from that home almost two years old; a crooked trail leading him deeper into dark places, a trail dotted with placards offering Five Thousand Dollars for the Sabine Kid, hide or hoof. A trail marked with snake tracks and shadows, whittled plain with his road-sign in the history of Southwest lawlessness. In Oklahoma, the Nations, Arkansas, the deep piney lands of East Texas.

A twisty trail skeining through those lost years, since that long ago afternoon in the Panhandle when the main drag of Tallulah had racketed to the smash of gunfire, its alkali dust stained dark with bullet-let blood. And he, the last of the Kirbys on his feet, powder-burned and vindictive, riding the out trail, knowing that so long as old Milt Yocum lived and held his baronial power and pull he, last of the Kirbys, would be an outlaw with a price tag on his black pelt.

All because the gunspeed of Yocum's crooked sheriff couldn't match the pattern of his scheming. And Yocum law called it murder, when self-defense should have cleared Lee Kirby. Kirby, now the Sabine Kid and riding far range, yet headed West toward the Pecos plateau country with the spring. Jingling a trail that allowed of no turning back, the road behind him closed by grim misdeeds.

A gunhawk, with the brand of his calling hard upon him. The Kid's brows drew together, darker and harder bitten, as he dropped his quirly and ground it beneath boot heel. Nor did any humor or friendliness dwell in the chill sooty black of his eyes, as he made his way on to Drood's, steeling himself against the old, surging bitterness. An unquiet engendered by that thread of prairie wind whispering here on the Brazos, sharpening the poignancy of his loneliness. And the edge of his swift temper.

In the store-saloon he sought a seat against the wall, in a dim corner, where he dealt solitaire and drank alone. His dark face, hard as granite for all its still repose, was veiled by tobacco smoke from the thin

cigarette ever between his thinner lips. And his eyes, narrow and hooded, watched the room with a saturnine, masklike alertness.

The other occupants, sensing his humor, let him alone. But a newcomer who swaggered in shortly didn't seem to catch the hint of leaving Sabine to his own devices. Loud-mouthed, rusty-haired, pale-eyed and squirrel-toothed, seemingly the worse for his likker, Flip Sarko wanted everybody to savvy that he was the boss tough cooky of Six-Shooter Bend. Carlsbad tilted rakishly over one eye, his twin guns belted in hand-tooled holsters, he glanced more than once toward the Kid and made comments which he thought were witty to the accompaniment of a raucous, whinnying laugh.

Old Jerky Rabb, chair tilted against the wall, a vile-smelling corncob pipe between his mustached lips, let his bleak eyes rest on Flip Sarko, then slide slyly toward Sabine. Flip, leader of the Blackjack gang, was patently on the prod for trouble; likely priming himself for blacker deviltry due to come in the night's darkest hour, when the rest of his bunch arrived. Jerky Rabb hadn't hung around Drood's for two, three weeks without getting wise to lots of things.

The marihuana smoker Tump, Harelip's jackal, seemed to derive much amusement from Flip's sallies, and took every occasion to egg the pale-eyed little killer on. And Harelip himself seemed to be brooding about something, behind his bar, his piggish eyes ever so often shifting toward Sabine in a long, appraising stare.

Almost as if Drood were trying to fit him to the description on some reward dodger. But the placards which had gone up along Kid Sabine's backtrail were without a picture, and physical depictions are often very vague and uncertain. Harelip, truth is, was worried.

But his uneasiness about his visitor abruptly terminated as someone came on the porch—and he saw who that someone was in the yellow lamplight. So did everybody else in that liquor-fumed, smoke-hazed dive see, and a sudden, stark quiet blanketed the room as all eyes fixed on the doorway. A silence broken by Drood's thick, harelipped oath as he took the frayed cheroot from his mouth.

THE hillbilly girl from the wagon outfit stood there, her uncertain gaze faltering about the room. Just a moment she hesitated, then as Drood lumbered toward the bar end she walked quickly to him.

"I want a bottle of bluing, two spools of darning thread and a can of bakin' sody," she told him in a throaty, steady voice.

Harelip eyed her heavily as he leaned on the bar, making no move to get the articles. "Thet so?" he remarked. " 'Low as how mebbe I c'n fix yuh up, leetle lady. Ain't in a hurry, air yuh?"

"Yep, I am." Her tone was short, and manner a trifle nervous. "Considerable hurry. We're spannin' out early in the morning."

"Shore nuff! Waal now, thet's too bad." Drood turned away toward his store shelves. "Yore paw 'lowed this evenin' that he aimed tuh lay over a day or so—give his team a blowin' spell. Changed his mind kinder sudden-like, hey?"

The girl didn't answer. Flip Sarko, grinning his buck-toothed grimace, was swaggering toward her. She smiled faintly as he came up, stopped. For a second he watched her fumbling for the silver tied in a handkerchief, his pale eyes mentally undressing her from the crown of her cat-claw-honey hair to the soles of her slender feet.

"What's this about pullin' out?" he asked harshly. "Wasn't nothin' said of it a while ago when I was down to yore camp."

"Paw decided to go on," she told him briefly. "He takes notions, sudden-like, thataway."

Drood was slogging back with bluing, thread and soda. "Be right sorry to see yuh leave, missy," he mouthed. "Purty faces like yores air skeerce as hen's teeth hereabout."

"Well, the' ain't any hurry about leavin'," stated Flip Sarko. "Up here is more sociable like than that dam' waggin camp. Le's have a li'l' drink."

"No, thanks. I'm in a hurry." She flung a quick look at Drood, asked what the charge was. And seemed to recoil a little at something she read in his muddy, yellowish eyes; saw on his hideous leered mouth.

Sabine, watching through quirly smoke from his corner, saw her face go a little

white, and the deep long breath she drew. Saw Sarko place his hand on her bare arm, and the quick gesture with which the girl wrenched free. Tump, smoking his herb fag nearby at the bar chuckled wickedly.

"Ain't allus wise to crowd purty heifers, Flip," he said meaningly. "They ain't sometimes what they look."

Sarko's squirrel teeth showed in a bobcat snarl, and he grabbed the girl's arm again—hard, this time.

"I've handled wilder heifers than her, plenty times. An' made 'em like it, by gawd. Now looky here, Sis! Don't act so uppity. You ain't goin nowhere *yit,* savvy? *Poco tempo* I'll escort yuh back to them prairie schooners an' houn' dawgs—the *long way* back! Round by the owl's nest, yeah."

And he gave vent to his whinnying laugh, still holding on to her arm, looking around the room with amused meaningness. One or two of the spectators laughed; Drood chuckled coarsely. Tump, watching bright-eyed, was grinning widely, fingers toying with the haft of a knife sheathed at his belt. His dope-inflamed brain was relishing this.

The nester girl's blue eyes spat blaze. "Take your dirty paw off of me!" she said between white teeth. "I always thought you were a polecat, from the first second I looked at you yesterday. Now I know it—just as I know the road by here is not any short cut to the Lufkin trail, or that Millican Ferry isn't out of order!"

Flip threw back his head, whinnied again. And didn't remove his hand. Old Jerky Rabb was sitting very still, corncob cold between tight lips, slaty eyes hooded. And in the shadow Sabine's dark visage seemed to settle leaner, grimmer, bringing into hard relief its high cheek-bones. A roweling anger burned in him, at thought of this girl coming the quarter mile to Droods, alone in the night, without escort or protection, at the mercy of these Brazos bottom renegades who knew not the meaning of the word.

Damn a maverick pilgrim, anyhow! Those hillbilly hombres down yonder didn't have the savvy that God Almighty promised a dumb sheep!

He, Kid Sabine, wanted no gunslick notoriety around here; he'd wanted to hole up, doggo, for a couple of days, then head on West with the land script he'd won in that Texarkana poker game. Lose himself in the Pecos plateau with an iron of his own, try to forget that back trail placarded with law dodgers.

But now . . . Sabine cursed savagely under his breath, decked his cards.

Flip Sarko, still laughing, held onto the girl tight with one hand, while the other downed a slug of whisky that Drood shoved toward him. But the next second his mirth changed to a snarl as the white-lipped nester's open palm smacked against his hatchet face with an impact that sounded above the rising of ribald mirth in the room.

His fingers digging into her arm with a cruelty that made her wince, Flip cursed venomously. "I'll slap *my* brand on you worse'n that whack!" he snarled. "What I want I go after—*an' git,* by gawd! . . ."

The girl cried out, once, sharply; desperately her eyes raked the room for aid she could not hope was there. She didn't see the lithe figure moving out of the shadows with tread of a cougar—didn't sense him at all until Kid Sabine stood before the pair.

Nor did others in that expectant, watching room realize that the dark youth had moved; he was there before anyone saw him. Visage ice cold and flint hard, his sooty eyes flat, expressionless, fixed in steady regard of Flip Sarko with deliberate, sinister intentness.

"That'll be enough of this horse-opera for you, *hombrecito,*" came Sabine's clipped, metallic voice. "Take yore hand off of that girl before I shoot you loose. *Move!*"

And in the death-still silence that gripped the room Flip Sarko moved—one step back toward the bar.

III

FOR perhaps the slow count of three the tableau held, frozen. Then with a choky gasp the girl suddenly twisted free of Flip's clutch, stumbled a few unsteady steps along the bar. Her blue eyes had gone black and wide as recognition of Sabine registered; she instinctively halted behind him, as if feeling wholly secure in his shelter.

And as she moved, so did Flip Sarko. That contemptuous sobriquet of *hombrecito*—"little man"—one of the worst insults that can be given a gunnie in Texas—had gigged him with Mex spurs. Coupled with this

stranger's horn-in, it made a shoot-out inevitable. And the spectators in Drood's dump that late March night stared frozenly, gaze glued to the drama of life and death just about to unfold.

With a hoarse oath Sarko's hand stabbed for his gun as he started a flashing jump toward the girl in cowardly try for her body as a shield. But fast as Flip moved, the Sabine Kid moved faster. He slapped downward with left palm-edge, driving the half-drawn six-shooter from Sarko's hand; with the motion he raised his own shucked pistol and deliberately, savagely, laid its heavy barrel across the squirrel-toothed renegade's head.

And as Sarko collapsed against the bar, clawing wildly for support, Sabine struck again, coldly, slashingly. Sarko went down like he'd been hit by lightning; sprawled twitching and jerking on the puncheons. Even as Flip hit the floor the Kid sensed swift danger from his rear—he ducked, twisting, flinging himself aside, just as a sharp warning cry burst from the taffy-haired girl.

But he didn't drop the hammer of the .45 that lay back under his thumb. For Tump the jackal was diving floorward like a brained steer to land atop Flip Sarko, and the hillbilly girl held the neck of a shattered whisky bottle in her hand. The fiber-hafted knife dropped harmlessly from Tump's nerveless fingers as he fell—the steel he'd aimed to treacherously bury deep between Sabine's shoulder blades.

Sabine, death in his heart and slitted eyes, bent, jerked Flip's second gun and rammed it into his waistband. Its mate he silently handed to the breathless girl, who was regarding him steadily. Just looked at him, and it was as if a light had been turned on in her eyes.

Gun hammer rocked under thumb, Sabine stared sardonically about the place a second. Meeting eyes that were furtive, hostile, leery, from men who made no untoward move. The girl, at a chin gesture from the Kid, took her purchases from Drood, whose deep and heavy breathing sounded like he had distemper, coming from a visage which had gone dirty alkali in hue.

Slowly, with the girl moving in front, they went toward the open door. Quickly she stepped outside, and for just a second the dark youth stood framed in the doorway. No word or play was made to halt their passing, for every mothers' son in Droods knew the swift death that slept in that tied-down black gun. And Sabine's grin was wolfish as his slow, malignant stare traveled over the silent watchers.

"I might state," came his metallic drawl, "that from now on I'm through slappin' at hands and heads. Let yore conscience be yore guide, gents."

Then, like a fading shadow, he was gone into the black of night.

Clashing voices, oaths, confusion broke out in the room shortly after. As if the Kid's going had broken some hypnotic spell, freed the inmates from impotent, frozen fetters. They grouped around the gory Tump and Flip Sarko, trying to revive them with likker; Drood, cursing steadily, tonelessly, swabbed his sweaty, unlovely visage with a dirty bandanna, for once his everlasting Old Virginia cheroot forgotten.

The grizzled gunman, old Tom Rabb, hadn't left his chair against wall; a wicked half-grin curled his thin lips and his slate eyes were unusually bright under craggy brows as he watched the milling about.

"Flip ain't the first damfool tuh git his paws burnt on a yard of calico," he chuckled softly. "When he wakes up he won't be feelin' none better with that head, neither. He shore stuck his neck out fer it."

Jerky carefully relit his vile smelling pipe. "Through slappin' at hands an' arms an heads, huh?" The half-grin widened as his eyes grew sly, smoke-veiled, resting upon two ruffians just returning to consciousness.

"From now on out hit'll be hair, hide an' guts 'stead of hands an' heads, yeah. I'm wonderin', consider'ble, jest why Sabine didn't kill him—he ain't never been noted for squeamishness. The's a reason some'rs. An' I reckon 'hit's my job tuh find out that reason, 'fore somebody shows up here that knows him—'sides me. Five thousand bucks worth . . ."

Old Rabb's eyes grew bleak as a blue norther. "Feller 'ud have tuh punch a whole hell-slue of cows fer five thousand pesos—"

THE oak flat was gray with starlight as Sabine stepped away from Drood's door, leaving the boil and stir of aroused men behind. The girl, walking on ahead,

slowed her pace for him to catch up as he scanned the backtrack for sign of pursuit. Finding none.

His features were cold, hawkish, as he joined her; she looked up at him with a faint smile, her eyes starry with the light which had been turned on in them. For a moment she placed a slim, tanned hand on his sleeve, standing very close.

"I can't know how to thank you," she said softly. "But I do."

Sabine shrugged irritably, burned by a dull anger. "You little fool!" he greeted harshly. "Don't you sabe any better than to come traipsin' to a dump like Drood's, 'specially alone at night? What kind of hombres are at yore camp, anyhow—plumb damned idiots?"

For a moment she didn't reply, only looked at him. Then:

"I didn't know," she told him, husky-throated. "We're strange to this country, to its ways. Lige, my stepbrother, was busy; Sim, my stepdaddy, was—" she hesitated—"well, he's not going to do anything he can get somebody else to do. He—he's just that triflin' lazy. I reckoned there was no harm in my going—it wasn't far. I didn't know that men were so stinkin' mean hereabouts."

Sabine made a sound that might have been a laugh had it not been for the sand that grated in it.

"Live an' learn, I reckon—if yuh live long enough. Just like darin' hungry cougars with raw meat, for a girl to gallivant around this hell-hole. How come you spanned out here, anyhow? This shore's not the way to Lufkin."

"Guess we know that, now. That—that devil, Sarko, ran across us yesterday, other side of Pointblank Crick. He and another fellow. Said this road by Drood's Crossing was a short cut to the Santone Trail, as Millican Ferry was out of order and unusable right now. Said everybody come this way. 'Course he was lyin'. I never trusted him a-tall from the minute I set eyes on him. But paw swallowed it hook, line an' sinker."

Naturally, seemingly without consciousness of it, she placed her arm through the Kid's elbow crook; glanced frankly up at him.

"He's sure a heap different from *you,* Flip is. And—I've thought about you more'n once or twice—since the other day when we met. I don't even know your name, yet. Mine's Virgie Pullen, an' we're from the Tennessee Cumberlands."

Sabine, building a spill quirly, stared straight ahead, a scowl on his dark face. "That so?" And his voice sounded gruff, curt.

"That's so. What's yours?" She gave his arm a little squeeze.

"Kirby," he answered after a pause in which he crimped and lit his brownie. "Lee Kirby. But don't mention it to anybody here. If someone asks, just say it's Jones."

"All right, Lee. I won't." Virgie's voice was throatily soft. "I reckon the good Lord had somethin' to do with your being here this night. No telling what that devil Flip was up to, an' he was drunk. Then when that little polecat drawed his knife on you, aimin' to stick you in the back—" She broke off with a shudder rippling slim shoulders, drew closer to Sabine.

"An' I'm owin' you for that," he told her quietly. "Guess we're sorta even-Stephen, little lady. You think fast and move quicker."

"You—you don't reckon I kilt him, do you, Lee?"

"No," he grinned. "Worse luck you didn't. Both of 'em will likely come to, an' twisting their tails." Sabine's smile abruptly faded; he stopped, faced the girl squarely, had started to speak when down in the river bottom a barrel owl boomed, then suddenly burst into a wild, maniacal laughter that made Virgie Pullen catch her breath sharply.

"Lord above!" she whispered. "What was that? I—I'm afraid of this Texas country, Lee—"

"Listen." And his words were clipped, curt. "You'd better be afraid, for the woods are full of such varmints as Flip Sarko. Don't you trust nobody, *sabe,* unless yuh have good reason to. From here on to Lufkin, or wherever you're headed. An' tell yore paw to shake the dirt of this damn dump off'n his wagon wheels soon as God will let him."

Virgie looked at him steadily, lips slightly parted. A slender, gallant girl whose beauty was as natural to her as sunlight, moonbeams, breathing. And the full import of it, and of her, etched Sabine's face with the old, set bitterness; knifed him deep-

with that hidden, wistful loneliness with which pariahs of the owlhoot trail sleep ever cheek to cheek. No matter if the Plains folk who knew him knew also that he was a victim of injustice; no matter that he himself knew the whole of that filthy Yocum plot which had long ago paupered him and killed his people; to the world and its sheriffs he was an outlaw, a killer, a wolf.

Her loveliness, her *self*, wasn't for him even to think of. Him, Lee Kirby, worth five thousand bucks hide or hoof, powder-damned to the hateful loneliness of the left-hand trail. The hombre known as Kid Sabine, with the brand of the wolf upon him, marked for death . . .

And the bitterness of those thoughts reflected deeper in his fierce, dark face as he stared hot-eyed down at Virgie Pullen, just beyond the circle of light from the camp in the motte.

And Virgie Pullen, mountaineer girl, was a daughter of Eve. A strange, tender little smile, wholly understanding, edged her red lips as she looked up at this dark young rider who'd so queerly entered her life, appeared to aid her in a black hour of need. And while she could not read his mind, she read something in the depths of his sooty eyes she would never forget . . . something which made a lilty little song begin to strum in her heart.

"When will we see each other, again?" she asked softly.

Sabine drew himself together with a jerk. "Guess this is *adios,* miss," he said stiffly, abruptly. "I'm headin' for bedground—daylight comes early in this neck of the woods. An' you stick close to camp, *sabe?* Keep eyes an' ears peeled tonight—an' tell yore men folks to do that same. Lotsa luck to yuh, Virgie Pullen. *Adios.*"

"*Adios,* all-man. I'll never, never forget you, Lee—always remember that. Good-by."

And very suddenly Virgie stood on tiptoe, and for one brief wild moment Lee Kirby felt the warmth of her red lips pressed against his mouth. Then she whirled, and without a backward look ran lightly into the aura of firelight, where hounds were whining and the shiftless shike-poke called Sim Pullen, seated on the wagon tongue, was scraping *Sally Gooden* on a fiddle.

IV

WHAT Sabine awaited, half expected, came with the slow creep of morning. At that eerie hour called mirage dawn, when night's hours are blackest and all nature seems to suspend, briefly, drugged by sleep.

Holed up in his arroyo lair, motionless in that dim borderland just between sleep and wakefulness, the Kid heard the after-midnight arrival of those riders at Drood's. Five or six of them, walking their horses cautiously and staking them out. But afterwards, things had grown quiet and the dive lights extinguished. Tired, Sabine dropped off to sleep.

The furor down at the wagon camp waked him instantly.

A flurry of gunshots, loud whoops and yells, screams of women and frenzy of hound dogs. Moil of pounding hoofs, oaths and terse commands—Sabine heard all as he raced toward the squatter camp, keeping well in the shadows.

But the pounding hoofbeats were fading, the firing dying down, when he got there. So, Sabine kept to the brush, making good use of eyes and ears as men began arriving from Drood's, flinging questions and curses. Overacting the part, the Kid noted sardonically . . .

A game old as Moses. Night raiders attacking camp, stampeding the remuda and making away with the animals. Escaping in the riot of whooping and gunfire and boiling hoofs before the dazed victims knew what was happening. All plain as skunk tracks to West-wise eyes.

Drood was there, making a great show of howdy-do about it. Cursing and reviling the raiders. Flip Sarko was there, head bandaged, stomping around importantly. Tump, also dirty-turbaned, smoked his herb cigaret and grinned wickedly. Old Jerky, with a mighty sour look on his seamed and scarred countenance, stared about disgustedly, his cynical, knowing gaze shifting over the assemblage.

The Kid watched them all, there in the light of the hastily kindled fire. Hearing Sim Pullen's wail of "ruint—plumb ruint—only a lone jackass mule left that was too stinkin' lazy to run!" Virgie, tear stains on her pale face, tried to comfort two terrified children who clung to her wildly. Her

mother, dry-eyed and stony-visaged, sat staring at the fire, saying no word. In the far wagon a woman was sobbing uncontrolably, rackingly . . .

"Musta been thet tough bunch from the Yeagua," Harelip was saying. "Killers an' rustlers, they air. We'll git right in behint 'em, folks, but they done got a big head start. 'Hit's hard luck, all right."

Yeah, tough. Sabine's smile was saturnine as he faded into the scrub toward his soogan. Hard gang from the Yeagua! Buffalo chips! Flip Sarko's scheme of tolling those shorthorn fools by Drood's had hatched out its devil's egg; they were stranded in a hell-hole that had turned more than one gray hair on the heads of John Law's minions.

And Virgie Pullen, stranded here with them . . . Sabine's eyes were bleak, his lips knife thin, as slowly he crawled back into his blankets.

DROOD'S dump seemed abnormally quiet after the early morning furor. few razorback hogs rooting around; the Mex cook banging pots and pans; the rising sun scouring flat and bottoms of mist and shadows. Down at the wagon camp Sabine saw people moving about, and its picket line was empty but for a lone flop-eared mule.

The Kid ate early breakfast in the kitchen, closely watching the Spic cook. Before he'd finished Jerky Rabb came bowlegging in, sat down at the table with a gruff howdy. He cocked a bleary eye at Sabine.

"Where was you during all the ruckus this mornin?" Jerky asked.

"Bedground," the Kid returned briefly. "What come off?"

Rabb, with a cynical gleam in his slate eyes, told him. And in a dry manner that suggested to Sabine, somehow, that old Jerky knew Sabine knew all about it. But the Kid kept his visage poker blank.

"Tough," was his sole curt comment.

"Ain't it?" drawled Jerky. "Shore leaves them pore folks sorta up the crick, huh? That purty gal 'peared right smart upsot 'bout it. But she shore don't lack no sand in her craw, I'm a'statin'."

"Sand?" Sabine's voice was harsh, mocking, as he rose to leave. He flicked a glance down at Jerky, and said bitterly: "One helluva lot *that* buys a person in this cold-decked game. Just exactly—*nothin'!*"

Jerky squinted up, a faint grin on his grizzled mouth. But it did not touch the cold hardness of his bleak eyes.

"Where's the's sand, amigo," he said quietly, "a feller gen'rally finds pay dirt. A wink's good as a nod tuh a blind mule, reckon."

Sabine started to retort, then, with another flashing look at the old busky, walked away without replying. As he made toward his cached buckskin, he was wondering—and no little—about that warped old paisano who went by Jerky Rabb.

The life of the hunted had given Kid Sabine a mighty acute sixth sense . . . and that sixth sense was right now buzzing its warning rattles.

HIGH NOON came, passed. The Kid, curbing his restless pony deep in the northwest brakes, took a breather while he built a smoke. All morning he'd tried to follow the spoor of the rustled remuda, but the trail had petered out in that jumbled conglomeration of gullies and washes and wooded hogbacks that stretched away toward the Yeagua.

No dice. The pilgrims might as well kiss their horses and mules good-by. Just as he, Kid Sabine, had briefly told the hillbilly girl, Virgie Pullen, good-by that midmorning, back there on the shin-oak flat above the Brazos.

Drood had, she told Sabine, offered to sell Sim and Lige Pullen a quartet of crowbait nags, seeing as how they wanted to pull out right away. He'd asked four hundred dollars, but after argument had finally settled for three. Which left the Pullen immigrants exactly less than twelve dollars to their name.

"All the scrimpin's an' savin's of a lifetime, gone—just like that!" Virgie said, snapping her fingers. For a quartet of scarecrow buzzard-baits that wouldn't likely get them far as Cat Springs, Sabine mentally added. He'd seen those starved animals in Harelip Drood's back corral.

Anyhow, the Pullens aimed to try to get away soon after dinner time. Get away from Six-Shooter Bend soon as God Almighty would let 'em . . .

Sabine had made his farewell brief, for Sim and Lige Pullen both were eying him with patent, open hostility. The Kid didn't

know, nor did Virgie tell him, that Drood and Sarko and others had strongly hinted to her men folks that early morning that likely "this Jones hombre" savvied a lot more about that remuda rustling than he made on.

A good peg to hang dirty clothes on. Virgie expressed her opinion as such in no uncertain terms, to the anger of the Pullens. And her querulous mother sided with her second husband, who didn't in the least like his outspoken, independent stepdaughter.

"Maybe our trails will cross again, sometime," Sabine had told Virgie, diffidently, for him. "I'm headin' West, out where the winds come from. An' carryin' the memory of last night with me, girl. I'll always carry it. Don't reckon I'll forget you, soon."

"Please don't." Her voice was low, almost edged with the tears that glinted bright behind her blue-bonnet eyes. "Don't ever, Lee. For I won't you. Oh, I—I wish—I was ridin' with you!"

"No, you don't." Sabine's words came bitter, brittle. "You're the finest girl ever given to a man to know, Virgie Pullen, but —a feller can't outrun his past. It always catches up. The—the things I like tuh think, dream about, ain't for me. They're a long, *long* ways off, and always will be, for me—*Adios.*"

"GOOD-BY, Lee." Her voice had choked then; swiftly she turned to hide the tears. And Kid Sabine, tickling his buckskin with a light spur, touched fingers to his hat and drifted into the bush, his dark face drawn, grim.

"A man has to stick to the tunes he can whistle," was his terse, self-lashing reflection. The soft, wistful loveliness of Virgie Pullen was not for him, even to think about. Representing all that was good and clean and fine in the world; all that was sweet and wholesome. Something he could never have.

Not even to think about. . . . Save in brooding dreams beside some lonely long-rider campfire, along the twisted left-hand trail. . . .

The sun was fast westering when Sabine, jogging back toward Drood's by circuitous route, heard that distant smash of gunfire.

V

CLEAR as the crack of ax against a sun-cured log it came—the sharp spang of a rifle, sending its echoes racketing against swale and ridge. And hard on its heels sounded the thin, far-off cry of a woman's scream, seemingly stopped abruptly in mid-note.

Then silence—hot, heavy, tingling with tragedy. . . .

Kid Sabine didn't hesitate. Feeding his buckskin the gig, he lined toward the sounds, bent low across the pony's black mane. For that shot and cry had come from the direction of the dim wagon road which ran from Six Shooter Bend toward Cat Springs and Persimmon Creek—the trail the Tennessee immigrants would travel after leaving Harelip Drood's.

Lee Kirby didn't need to read any tea leaves to know what was happening, down yonder in the cedar brakes. And in no time at all he came across the spoor his keen eyes sought.

The tracks of an unshod mule, beside another set of hoofprints. Both traveling lickety-split, northwest. As if he'd been there, Sabine could read the story written on the mast-layered loam. Virgie, riding the mule, getting too far from the wagons, fallen prey to some laired horseman who likely had been tailing the train, awaiting this very chance—

Her single panicky shot missing, then she'd been overpowered and dragged away toward that hell's-jumble of shinnery country where an army could hide forever in its fastnesses. No time to lose, now, Lee Kirby!"

The buckskin grunted at the dig of star rowels against its flank, made a belly-low racing stride in three jumps. Crashing headlong through scrub and thickets, hurtling down washes and lunging up slopes, the cat-hammed horse fairly burned the wind.

Sabine, black head bare and hat dangling by chin strap at the back of his neck, stretched lower over his hull stem, six-shooter primed in right hand. With low words he encouraged his pony to greater speed, every thought scoured from his brain save the burning one of catching Virgie Pullen and her abductor. And he knew that with Chigger's speed he would catch

up, for a Missouri mule isn't noted for fleetness.

The danger that the kidnaper would hear his pursuit and go into bushwhack for him scarcely occurred to Sabine. Something he could never have explained to anyone; a stronger, stranger motivation than he had ever known drove him recklessly into certain gun threat, utterly heedless of consequences. At that orey-eyed moment Kid Sabine had filed off his front sights and thrown away his caution boots.

The sun dipped lower; shadows spread, grew long, purpled. Chig's nostrils distended red, his lathered sides heaved like bellows. And it was just beyond a brush-matted wash that Sabine caught first glimpse of his quarry.

A star-faced sorrel and black hatted rider, the man holding onto a panting, fast-tiring mule by short *riata*. Upon that mule the swaying figure of Virgie Pullen, her wrists thonged to the saddlehorn, mouth gagged, taffy-hued hair flying in wild disarray. The man glanced over his shoulder, raised his pistol and let loose a wild shot toward the Kid.

Flip Sarko! . . . Virgie—and Flip Sarko . . .

A SAVAGE curse spat from Sabine's snarl-curled lips as he crashed ahead hard on their heels, earing back Colt hammer and gathering Chig's reins tight in his left hand. Savagery had built up, to the nines, in him those past ten seconds. And fury-whipped recklessness.

The gun of no hombre on God's green earth packed *his* name on its hot bullet this man's day—

Sarko, seeing he would be swiftly overhauled, dropped the riata and snatched carbine from a saddle booth. Its crashes shattered the silence like breaking glass as he fired from a dancing, boogery pony, and lead burned the air all around Kid Sabine.

But Chigger, bent low at racing run, was weaving to knee pressure like a fox snaking its trail, the Kid flattened Comanche fashion off the kak. And as they smashed through the last sumac clump separating them, Sabine dug in both gigs and hurtled straight for the frantic sorrel and that fear-gray, hate-distorted face topping it.

Desperately Sarko dropped Winchester and clawed for his pistol, yelling wild curses and trying to spur his sorrel from the path of that headlong charge. Flip Sarko, squirrel-toothed young gunnie of the Blackjack Gang, its brutal, snake-blooded killer—coyoting at the last showdown! Mouthing the cries of a yellow coward facing the end of his crooked loop, assaying less than no guts at all.

Flip loosed one frenzied last shot as the bared-tooth buckskin cannoned into his sorrel, and the smash of Sabine's gun mingled with his. The Kid scarcely felt the tingling gouge, high up on his left arm, as Sarko's pony went down. For the heavy impact of his own lead had driven Flip clear of the kak—a slug planted just above the Brazos badman's belt buckle. And as he landed beneath flailing hoofs his scream sounded shriller than any woman's.

Wheeling Chig on a thin dime, Sabine poised for a finishing shot. But none was needed. Sarko, doubled in a knot with both hands clutching his reddening midriff, was done for. And he'd die the hard way.

Sabine, wasting scarce a glance at him, flung from the saddle and ran to where the panting mule stood, head down, empty-saddled. Virgie Pullen had fainted and tumbled off, only the cruel pressure of the pigging strings, tied wrists to kak stem, keeping her slumped against the animal's side.

Swiftly cutting the thongs, and whipping away the gag, Sabine carried her to a nearby strip of mesquite grass; laid her gently down. Washed her white face with water from his canteen, fanned her with his hat. Brushed back the wild disarray of her catclaw-honey hair with unsteady fingers, calling her name anxiously.

"Virgie! Virgie, girl! Talk to me. You hurt much, honey?"

A tiny sigh trembled through her soft body; those black lashes quivered once, again. Then her blue-bonnet eyes, so large now in the chalky oval of that face framed in the crook of the Kid's bloody left arm, flew wide open with dazed question in their depths.

And as full consciousness came she sat up, and with a long quivering shudder threw both arms tightly around Sabine's neck.

"Oh, Lee! *Lee!* I—I just *knew* you'd come, somehow and save me! . . ."

"Flip won't bother you any more," Sa-

bine told her grimly. "An' he'll have lotsa time to reflect on his sins—before hell gets his lousy soul. What happened, girl? Tell me."

Tersely, still trembling, Virgie told him. How she'd ridden ahead and off the trail to hunt game for supper; how Sarko had suddenly appeared from covert and captured her, her one shot flying wild as he hit the rifle. How he'd boasted what he aimed to do, with her, later—

"Oh, he was horrible! He said—said—Ah, I'm glad—*glad* he's dead . . . glad that *you* killed him, Lee! I'd 'a kilt him myself if I'd been able to! I—Oh, honey—honey! . . ."

Her arms wound tighter about Kid Sabine's neck, for a long, long moment Virgie Pullen sobbed her heart out against a stained, red-damped shoulder.

DUSK deepened, thickened to night's dark as they slowly rode to the wagon trail, then yonder to where a camp fire burned, splashing a pure orange hole against the black. Figures crouched around it; a steer bawled in the long distance. And a breath of wind, sentiment with the thousand miles of wild land it crossed, whispered through the leaves; bringing on its invisible wings the old, wild call of the prairie.

It would be like that down the Western trail, thought Lee Kirby. A red heart of fire burning beneath the star-dusted arch of the sky, and a high plateau wind crossing the earth, haunty with old, remembered smells, the soft smells of spring. And the chant of a coyote, wild and sad, in the mystery beyond. . . .

"I don't care who you are, or what yore name is!" Virgie was saying with passionate intensity. "I don't care what you've done, or what you do! You're all that matters to me, honey. I just know that you are my man, always have been and always will be, for ever'n ever!"

Sabine, his face grim, drawn, bitter, looked at her. His for the taking. And the mountain girl knew that this dark youth loved her in his strange, wild way, even as she cared for him.

"It—it just ain't in the cards, Virgie," he said hoarsely. "My hands are red, my guts burnt to cold steel. Powder burnt, damned with it. My back trail has been long an' rough, plenty marked with shadders."

"And that trail's writ a story on yore face, honey," she told him softly, gently, clinging tight to his hand. "Lee—*Lee!*—Let me help you to forget all that! I just can't let you go, now—when I want you an' need you, so. Not when I love you thisaway! You can't leave me. Take me with you!"

"God help me," he muttered unsteadily, "but I love you, too, thatway. You don't *sabe* what you're askin', girl. I just can't let yuh throw yore life away, on me. Branded with the wolf iron, a bounty on my scalp—"

"We will go away off, where nobody know us," she told him. "Make our own home, our own life. Then, if folks won't let us be, we'll stand shoulder to shoulder and fight together till our last cartridge is empty!"

And right then Lee Kirby knew that he'd found something bigger and finer than he'd ever lost in the past, or could ever lose in any future. And it graved a picture, an ideal, deep within him that he would never forget. Branded, too, a sudden, indomitable resolve. Some loves are like that, once in a lifetime . . .

A long moment; tight in each other's arms, then Sabine gently put her away, looked long and deep and steady into Virgie's starry eyes.

'Go on to camp," he said brusquely. "Get together whatever you have to carry, but make it light. I've one more job to finish around here. Look for me about daylight. If I'm not back then—well, honey, I won't be coming back. You'll just have to go on ahead, with them."

"Lee!" Her voice was breathless, scared. "Is there no other way? Do you *have* to —do this?"

"Yes. But don't worry. I'll be back. Then we ride out where the winds come from, and start a little iron of our own. Just you an' me."

"Just us, man of mine. Forgettin' ev'rything behind us, Lee. And—I'll be waitin', right over yonder, way before the first peep of dawn."

Suddenly she framed his face in her hands; kissed him fiercely yet tenderly. "Come back to me, boy!" Virgie whispered. "Good luck."

VI

A QUEER unease lay upon Drood's dump that night. The six or eight hangers-on present seemed jittery, fiddle-footed; restless with that pricky feeling of something about to happen. A big poker game was in progress, with Harelip himself sitting in. Which itself was unusual, for Drood rarely gamed with his customers.

But tonight Jake Drood had been drinking heavily, and something seemed to be weighing heavier on his mind.

Jerky Rabb sat in, also. Now and then he glanced slyly toward Sabine, whose chair was against the wall near the poker table where no one could approach his rear. Sitting still-faced, lazy-eyed, watching through his screen of quirly smoke. He'd arrived some half hour ago.

Tump, his ferret orbs bright with marihuana, came into the room with his sideling, crablike gait; went over to Harelip and said something to him in an undertone. Cursing, Drood pitched down his cards, drained his glass. And after a moment looked at Sabine.

"You been out all day, some'rs," he remarked heavily. "Yuh see anything of Flip Sarko anywheres?"

The Kid exhaled smoke, nodded briefly. "Yeah. Late this evenin'."

Drood started a little; blinked. "Thet so? Yuh—yuh talk to him none?"

"Uh-huh." Sabine's voice was flat, toneless. "Consider'ble. In lead lingo, Drood."

Harelip stiffened like he'd been jabbed with a knife. "Yuh-yuh mean—yuh kilt Flip?" he asked slowly, thickly.

"Nothin' else. He's out yonder in the scrub somewhere. Sorta got tangled in his own crooked loop, Flip did."

Jerky Rabb grunted, his visage poker-blank. Drood started to ask a question, then shut his disfigured lips tight, motioning for the dealer to throw the cards. Kept drinking heavier than ever. Waved his jackal Tump behind the bar to serve the liquor, while every few seconds his gaze flicked toward Sabine with glowering, malignant intensity.

Spilling over his chair like a bloated toad, gaming with the money he'd beaten the immigrants out of for those crowbait nags . . .

"Git 'em comin' an' git 'em goin'," he remarked hoarsely, peering at his cards, then squinting toward the Kid. "Why'n't *you* take a hand, feller? Mebbe you c'n git some of this tenderfoot *dinero*. Easy come, easy go—as the doctor says."

Sabine's smile was bleak. "Maybe I can, Drood. Easy come, easy go, is right. Might as well have some of it, I reckon."

"If yuh'r lucky," Drood said unpleasantly, significantly.

"My luck is gen'rally good," said Latigo. "Just deal me in."

FOR maybe three quarters of an hour the game rocked along, with faces around the lamplit table growing tighter as bets increased in size. And those sin-warped visages would have been a whole lot tighter if they'd known what Lee Kirby did, right then. That all the saddles and bridles of their corralled horses, save one, were safely hidden in the scrub where they couldn't be easily found—and those corral bars let down.

Sabine had attended to those little details, Injun fashion, before he showed up at the store-saloon. Just as he'd staked Chig out in a convenient motte, saddled, ready. In company with another saddled, ready horse—the pick of the crop. The set-up was all staged for his last play.

What he didn't know, however, or figure on, was the actions of old Jerky Rabb. For Jerky also had his mount out-staked, and very ready. And there was a double-barrel shotgun booted on his scarred saddle . . .

"Fifty bucks," Sabine clipped, shoving out the dinero. Drood raised fifty, which the Kid saw and upped. Jerky dropped out, as did the others, one by one. Harelip was dealing—and dealing cold deck. But Sabine gave not the slightest indication that he knew.

Back and forth the two met, raised, until over five thousand dollars lay in the table's center. Then Sabine said shortly, "Callin' you, Drood. Turn 'em up."

Men breathed hard, sitting motionless, as Harelip, with a hideous leer, slowly faced his pasteboards, one by one. "Read 'em an' weep, Mister Jones boy!" he gloated. 'Straight flush—Ace high. Uh Spade Royal. Reckon *thet* yanks yore fangs, huh?"

"Too bad, Drood." Sabine's voice was droning, cold as Death's touch. "Just too

—damned—bad . . ." and with left hand he fanned his cards face up in one swift gesture. "Tens—*on sixes!* And I win."

Drood, glaring up in amazed astonishment at the chill words, suddenly petrified stock-still. For he was looking straight into the ugly black hole of Kid Sabine's six-shooter. Nor did he move a muscle, for Jake Drood knew he was as close to death as he'd ever be in his treacherous life.

"Just hold the poses, gents," Sabine told the paralyzed gamers. "Hands flat on the table—that's it!" Swiftly he scooped up the paper money, leaving the scatter of silver coins. His lips were curled, ugly; the light of hell's own deviltry glinting in his slitted, sooty eyes. Slowly, cat-footed, he started inching away along the wall, pistol weaving over the speechless men like the swaying head of a coiled rattler.

"I'm collectin' now, with interest, Drood. What you slicked them ignorant nesters out of. Easy come, easy go, yuh stated. Well, any of you sons feel like makin' it easy go —from me?"

A second gun had somehow appeared in the Kid's left hand—he held the death-still room frozen under the threat of those twin cutters. And he was almost to the open front door when a movement at the far bar end drew a lightning flick of his eyes.

Tump, his rat face twisted in hate and fury, was jerking up like a jack-in-the-box, leveling a sawed-off shotgun. The roar of it came a split-second behind the smash of Sabine's uplifted pistol, its buckshot pellets flying wild from nerveless hands. For Tump's face had disappeared in a red smear as the Kid's slug took him between the eyes.

Harelip Drood, with a sound of inarticulate fury, plunged sidewise for his gun. Sabine made a flipping motion with his right hand, and the Colt spat even before it attained a level in front of him, its leaden slug driving into Drood's midriff, sending him sprawling. Like a sack of grain split asunder, his eyes blank as marbles and skin gray with death, Drood crashed down with a thud which shook the lamps.

"Anybody else feel lucky?" came Sabine's metallic whisper.

No voice answered. Old Jerky had backed against the wall, his hands raised shoulder high. Nobody else moved. At the door the Kid paused a moment, eyes raking the room. "I wouldn't advise any of yuh to come outside the next five, ten minutes," he drawled. *"Adios."*

The door slammed violently, and he was gone into the night.

Two minutes later the thud of racing ponies' hoofs released the paralysis that gripped the inmates of Drood's dump. With yells and curses they swarmed about the entrance, firing wildly after those receding sounds. There were fiercer curses when they noted the missing saddle gear, the open corral bars. Pursuit was hopeless, out of the question—

Anyhow, dead bosses paid no wages. To hell with that killer!

Except for old Jerky Rabb. Forking his hammer-head claybank, he lunged away westward hard on the trail the Kid had taken. And a bleak, saturnine grimace skewed his knife-thin lips as he took the U. S. Deputy Marshal's badge from his undershirt, pinned it to his worn vest.

"The trail's long an' it's wide," he muttered to himself. "But it always comes to uh end—like this . . ."

Kid Sabine didn't hear. Clear of Six-Shooter Bend, he was galloping away from the Brazos, the blood singing in his veins and that thread of breeze from the high mesas whispering things he knew, understood.

Riding to a girl, named Virgie Pullen . . . and that wind of the West.

VII

THE first hint of day was trembling in the east, the first cock of morning crowing at Tullo's crossroads store on the Persimmon, when a lone rider came jingling up from the mists of night that shrouded the low, wooded bottomlands. Leading a second mount with empty saddle, stirrups looped over the horn.

A rider who made straight for the red eye of a fire that glowed like a bomb yonder in the shinnery, dimly outlining two big wagons. Outlining also, in slender silhouette, the figure of a girl who stood just at the light's edge, a small blanket roll at her feet, waiting.

As the Kid rode up she came to meet him. "I'm ready," Virgie Pullen said sim-

ply. "Nor is anybody sorry to see me go."

"Then we'll ride," nodded Sabine. He lashed her cantle roll, she assisting. There seemed to be no sign of life at the wagons, save the strident snoring of Sim Pullen. The Kid's grimace was warped as he glanced that way, then at the girl.

"Yore maw raised no ruckus about yore leavin'?" he queried.

Virgie shook her head shortly; no. "We never got along," was her quiet answer. "No love lost between us, ever. She's glad they're shed of me. Do we start, now?"

"Not just yit, folks!"

Like a knife-thrust through the dawn came the brittle words, as a shadow stirred in the darkness hard by. "Stand pat, you two. Don't move. This is a Greener, Kid —an' she packs blue whistlers!"

It was the voice of old Jerky Rabb. Jerky, wily grizzled fox of the law pack, who'd taken a little known short-cut behind Sabine to arrive at the immigrant camp ahead of him. Now holding a cold-turkey drop—

Sabine had made a convulsive start for his gun, but froze before completing the movement. The girl was between him and Rabb. Virgie stood speechless, stock-still; the Kid was helpless, "under the mistletoe." And old Jerky advanced out of the darkness, a grim smile on his seamed, scarred face.

The Kid just looked at him. And his young, dark visage became bitter as he saw the law badge on Jerky's vest. He drew a slow, deep breath; Virgie watched him with stark eyes.

"Looks like you hold top cards, mister," Sabine said. "I never was quite sure about you, Jerky."

"Well, I was of *you*," the lawman replied dryly. "Since that first minnit I laid eye on yuh back yonder, Kid Sabine. All five thousand dollars' worth."

"Bargain rates." The Kid carefully rolled a cigaret and touched match to the tip. "Milt Yocum's five thousand talking, Rabb. Yocum money an' Yocum perjury —not one of that yellow breed ever fought a square fight. I kinda figgered, somehow, that yuh were white man enough to be sorry if you knew the facts. Well, live an' learn, I reckon—"

"I do know the facts." Rabb's voice was grim. The wrinkles, fine and worn and wise, were gathered close about his eyes. "Lived quite a spell in Tascosa—out in the Pan. An' I know the Yocums—plenty."

HE looked from Sabine to the girl; long, hard. "Had a notion I'd find you two together," Jerky grunted. "So I took a short-cut tuh git here first. Jest what's the play, anyhow? Where were yuh headed?"

"West," said the Kid. "Pecos country."

"You and the girl?"

Virgie Pullen spoke for the first time. "Certainly I was going with him. He came for me, didn't he?" She glanced at the Kid, then at old Jerky, as if nothing more needed to be said. "I love him," she finished simply. "Where he goes, I go."

Rabb squinted at her quizzically. And his voice was sharp when he spoke; barbed.

"He's no angel, miss, case yuh didn't know. He's raised his share of hell an' then some, an' I'm here tuh acknowledge it. I never had any personal dealin's with him, never had any reason tuh buck any play of his'n, but he's sorta made a name for himself—out here in the East Texas piney. He's a smooth gent with the wimmin an' a bad'n with the men. A wild'n an' no mistake, little lady. You'd orter know all this."

"The only thing I orter know, and do know, is this." Virgie Pullen stood arrow straight, her gallant little chin raised high as she stepped to Sabine, hooked her arm through his. Nor did her eyes or voice waver as she looked foursquare at old Tom Rabb.

"He's my man, whatever he has been. And I'll marry him, even if I have to stand up with him under the limb they hang him from."

Jerky Rabb grunted, blinked, as he saw the sudden look on Lee Kirby's face, in his eyes. A look at once humble and proud and adoring, such as a man's face bears but once in a lifetime.

"You was aimin' tuh do what in West Texas?" the deputy asked gruffly.

"Use some land script I won in a poker game recent." Sabine's voice sounded harsh. "Five papers each givin' me right to six hundred an' forty acres of public land. Cashed at two an' a half cents uh acre. An' now worth enough tuh give us

a start, rod our own iron—out Pecos way—"

He broke off, shrugged. "Reckon at least that oughta settle yore mind about my motives, Jerky. Even *I* c'n read the earmarks of somethin' decent an' square, damn yuh!"

Sabine's voice had suddenly gone hoarse; his eyes were hot and his nostrils quivered as he stepped forward to the very muzzle of the Greener, a roll of greenbacks in his clenched fist.

"Here!" he snarled. "Give those damned hillbillies the dinero they was gypped out of for those crowbaits. Tell 'em—hell, anything! A' now, ol' timer, cut yore wolf loose. I don't aim to go back an' hang on Yocum hemp for somethin' I ain't guilty of."

"Easy, Kid," droned Uncle Sam's lawman. "Easy she goes, son." His gaze traveled from youth to girl, and they gave him stare for stare. Very suddenly old Jerky grinned, let the hammers down on his shotgun and swung the sawed-off Greener to his left hand.

Thrusting out his right, he gripped Sabine's hand with a grasp of iron. "Good luck, son! An' don't never let that little gal down."

"Jerky, I—" The Kid's voice choked as he returned the old law-dog's grip. "You won't be regrettin' nothin for this night, *amigo,*" he finished. "Not whatever."

The grizzled mustanger saw the fine sweat beading the Kid's forehead, and that strange, new, happy light in those eyes which had known for so long nothing but hate and the bitter loneliness of the hunted. He saw, too the light in Virgie Pullen's eyes, the radiance on her lips and face. Tear-wet eyes shining like twin stars, she stepped close to old Jerky, touched soft lips to his bristly cheek.

"Thank you!" she breathed unsteadily. "Oh, thanks!—"

He watched them mount, Jerky Rabb, his seamed visage bleak with the tightness in his throat. Just two outcasts of life; this unwanted girl of the immigrant train, this youth wanted by the law. Two waifs, who'd found peace in each other, and a future which beckoned challengingly. Funny thing, life, anyhow. Some folks live it full—then learn to live it straight. And both those younkers had plenty guts an' savvy . . .

Kid Sabine vaulted into his saddle and was alongside the girl, his buckskin eager and straining at the bit. Virgie gripped her reins, nodded to him; as the horses began to move she turned toward old Jerky, flung up a hand.

"Goodby, Mister Rabb!" she called softly.

"*Adios,* Jerky," Lee Kirby echoed. "Happy days an' a plenty long summer, *amigo!*"

"So long, folks," grinned old Tom Rabb. "Easy trails to yuh. And give my regards tuh West Texas!"

He stood watching, staring toward the far horizon of his mind's eye, as they vanished together into the mists of dawn. Riding together, to where the winds come from . . .

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When Rustlers Rode

By WALT COBURN

The tally was fifty head short. "None o' them cows," said old Jake, "had wings." So the T-Down boys rode—to the bad-lands where every hill sprouted a man with a gun.

DOC HARRIGAN had the play figured right from the start.

"They'll be dead men's bones up in the hills," he said one night, "before this thing is done."

The bulk of the T-Down cattle had been sold the year before. In that year of 1884 the death knell of the cow business had been rung with sheep bells. Bands of woolies infested that big range where thousands of beef steers had grazed but a few years before. A few of the cowmen hung and rattled, as the sayin' goes, reluctant to lay down a losing hand. The wiser ones had sold out to the sheep men and moved on in search of a new range.

That open range was now criss-crossed with barb wire fences. Sheep wagons camped at the water holes. Buffalo wallows were plowed up and flax planted. Sheep

had blazed the way for the dry land farmer. The cowpunchers vanished as the antelope had. Those who were too old to move now tended bar or followed a plow. The cow country was gone.

Some four hundred head of cattle grazed in the big pasture behind the T-Down ranch house. The fifty thousand acres under fence were used to fatten *sheep!*

We knew those four hundred cows and steers like a man knows his family. We'd known 'em since they were calves. Any one of us could have worked that herd on a moonlight night, cutting cows and calves, and never make an error. A stray in that herd was as plain as a wart on a fat man's nose.

We were late with the branding that spring. Why not? The cattle were in a pasture. We rode fence regularly. We knew the stock better than we knew our new nester neighbors. Summer drifted by with a lot of big unbranded calves following their mammys around. It was not until September that we rounded up the pasture and branded out.

"We're twenty-five head uh cows short," said Jake, the foreman. "You boys musta overlooked a bunch somewheres. Two or three uh you lope out there and ride them coulees clost."

We did. Not once, but every day for ten days, we combed that pasture. It was about ten miles square. Part of it was rough hills. The west end of the fence crossed a high butte, covered with scrub pine. A man might easily ride past a small bunch of cows in those hills. But he couldn't ride it every day for ten days and miss 'em. Not if he was any cow hand at all.

"None uh them cows had wings, boys," frowned Jake. "And the fence is in good shape. They ain't died in the bog holes, that's a cinch, because there's plenty uh water everywhere without 'em tryin' tuh drink at the boggy places. What's the answer?"

That was the question we'd all been asking ourselves every day for ten days. There could be but one answer. The cattle had been stolen. Twenty-five head of cows, each with a big calf, had been driven off.

We played detective for a few weeks, riding around. We were hunting horses, so we told the farmers when we stopped. Stopped just at meal time, savvy, riding sudden like off a ridge or out of a coulee. Not because we were hungry, but because we wanted to see who was eating beef instead of sow-belly. None of the dry farmers owned beef, understand, and if they had been frying steak or taking a beef roast from the oven, they would have to prove that they came honestly by that piece of cow meat.

No bueno. Nary sign. Our .45's wore callouses on our hips. We had inspected every dry land farm and 'breed camp within a radius of forty miles. When the first snow came, we gave up in disgust. There was too much other work to be done. We contented ourselves with augurin' about the mystery when we sat about the stove after supper.

CAME a day in February and the stolen cattle were all but forgotten. Pete LaForce, a 'breed boy of twenty, rode into the ranch about dusk. He was forking a bay bronc, half broken and gaunt from too much handling.

Now, a cowpuncher, upon meeting a stranger, may not recall the man's face nor be able to tell what color shirt or chaps he had on. But he'll be able to tell you, six months later, the brand on that stranger's horse and the animal's color.

We'd all known Pete since he was a kid running around the squaw camps wearing nothing but a breech-clout. A good hand with a green horse, for a 'breed. An exceptionally good rider. Too good. Because he'd make a bronc pitch rather than talk the horse out of it. Big boned, strong as a bull, and apt to be onery if he had a few drinks. When on the ground, he walked with a swagger that was meant to express his toughness. Also, he had been to school at Fort Shaw.

Yes, we knew Pete. But we none of us knew the horse. Brands? A blotched brand, a few weeks old, on his left thigh.

The T-Down, one of the oldest outfits in Montana, had not outgrown its old-time hospitality. There was no invitation to friends. That formality was for strangers. Pete simply put his horse in a vacant stall, threw the animal some hay, and helped us finish the evening chores.

"Fair-lookin' colt that yo're ridin'," said

Jake as we started for the mess house.

Pete nodded. "I sell that bronc to you cheap, Jake."

Jake was a born trader. He'd trade anything he owned. Pete knew it.

"Where'd you get him, Pete? Steal him?" Jake loved to josh folks.

Pete grinned. "I buy him from John Deschamps."

"I'll take a look at him in the mornin', Pete."

We went in to supper. Pete ate heartily. This sort of a meal was not to be had in 'breed camps. Head lowered, he paid heed to nothing but the pile of food on his tin plate.

Between Jake and myself sat "Doc" Harrigan, one of the few real cow hands left on the ranch. Doc and I looked at each other and then at Jake. Jake winked. We went on eating. Jake and I both knew that Doc knew that bay colt.

After supper, we gathered in the bunk house. Jake, in an offhand manner, announced that he wanted Doc and me to come up to the office to help make out a grub list for some sheep camps. We left Pete talking with the boys in the bunk house.

Five minutes later, Jake, Doc and I were examining that blotched brand.

"It's a Long-S brand and a mighty poor job uh brand workin', Jake," said Doc. "Tried tuh make a Lazy-8 outa it and blotched it. Is there a wire cut above his off hock?"

Jake held the lantern closer. "Yeah. Know the pony, Doc?"

"Seen him last fall. Bad lame then. Some nester had run that wild bunch uh S broom-tails through a fence, I reckon, and this 'un had got tangled in the wire. Got lame and couldn't foller his bunch. Like as not Pete throwed his rope on him and brung him home. I never did trust that loud-mouthed Injun, Jake."

Half an hour later we were putting Pete through an impromptu quizzing that took all the cock-sureness out of him.

"If that two-bit phone line wasn't down I'd have the sheriff out here in the mornin'," Jake told him. "Wait, I reckon you'll have the job uh takin' him tuh town. Bill Rawlins uh the S outfit was tellin' me a while back that he was missin' a lot uh colts. I reckon we got one uh the gents that's been helpin' them colts disappear."

"I tol' you I got that bay colt from John Deschamps," protested Pete uneasily.

"You're a liar!" Doc burst out, bluffing a little. "I seen yuh ketch that colt on Seven Mile Crick."

The expression on Pete's face told that old Doc had guessed shrewdly.

"But I doctor up that colt and keep him from die! He ain't even halter broke when I ketch him. Me, I break him myself. I save him from the wolf and now you arres' me!"

"Uh-huh," grinned Jake. "And you'll git about twenty years in the pen, too."

For an hour Pete pleaded. No go. Then he changed his tactics.

"Las' August, Jake, you lose twenty-five head of cows and calves, don't you?"

THE three of us pricked up our ears. We had flattered ourselves that we had kept that loss pretty much of a secret.

"Who told you we was losers of some stock?" asked Jake.

"Nobody. Me, I know where those cows go. Forget 'bout this bay colt and I tell you 'bout those cows." Pete's big mouth spread in a triumphant grin.

The grin was short lived. Jake's fist swung against the 'breed's jaw with a jolt that landed Pete in the corner.

"Now, yuh yella-hided hoss thief," growled Jake, when Pete sat up, whining, "start talkin'! Talk fast, Injun, er I'll whup yuh till yuh can't stand."

The office door swung open at this juncture and Bill Rawlins, owner of the Long-S, stepped inside. He looked at us, then at Pete, who was wiping blood from the corner of his mouth. Jake must have loosened up a few wisdom teeth.

We didn't say anything.

"What's the row, boys?" grinned Bill. "I just come by to see about leasin' that Seven Mile hay ranch uh yourn. Looks like I'd interrupted a business meetin' uh some kind."

Jake told Bill the story of the stolen colt. "And now the low-down 'breed is tryin' tuh beg off. Says he knows about some stolen T-Down cows."

"Then say we let him talk, Jake," put in Bill in an unruffled tone. "Whether he talks himself outa the hole, depends on how much information he gives us. Looks

tuh me like we're about tuh uncover a nest uh rattlesnakes. Hop to it, Pete."

Pete hopped to it. He told the story four times upon request. Each time it was the same yarn. If he lied, he was a master at the art for his story dovetailed with certain facts we already knew.

Eighty miles east of the T-Down and north of the Long-S horse ranch, lies a strip of bad-lands called Pine Hills. Too rough to farm, they were free from fences. The wolves kept out the sheep wagons. A wild bit of country covering an area of forty square miles and ending at the Missouri River. Deep canyons, narrow, razor-backed ridges, rocks, scrub-pines, buck-brush.

More than one hunted outlaw had holed up there for the winter. An organized band of horse thieves had made that their headquarters until they had been killed and scattered while running horses across the nearby Canadian line.

Scattered through the Pine Hills were 'breed cabins. A corral, a few acres of hay land, a spring. That was all the 'breed wished for.

With a fast horse, a stout rope, and a running iron, that 'breed could build himself a sizable herd in a few years.

Part Cree, part French. All related somehow. Cousins, uncles, in-laws by the dozens. Some good, some bad. Good riders, crack shots, and they knew the Pine Hills like a kid knows his own back-yard.

The leader of the tribe was old 'Poleon Renault. A giant in build, and keen as a wolf in cunning. A good man with a fiddle and a bad man in any sort of fight. Six-shooter, knife, fists. No king ever ruled with stronger hand than did 'Poleon over his Pine Hills domain.

At Rocky Point Crossing, this same big 'breed had shot a man to death with a dinky little .32 revolver. It took five of these pills to down the man who faced 'Poleon across the barroom of the Rocky Point saloon.

That big 'breed, with three .44 slugs in his body, had made ten miles on snow-shoes that night, so the story goes.

" 'Poleon, she's de strong man, by gar," the 'breeds would tell you, and go into the details of how their leader had killed his second man in a gun fight.

Gregory, 'Poleon's brother, had never killed anyone. But his great chest bore some ugly scars, the result of a hand-to-hand fight with a mountain lion that he had wounded, then treed. Gregory had climbed the tree and killed the lion with his bare hands.

Then there was Joe, son of Gregory. I had been with these two when Gregory had sent the big, rawboned kid, then about fifteen, into the den of a lion we had tracked. Joe had been reluctant to go, and hung back until shoved into the big cave.

"Get de lion, Joe," Gregory told him with a laugh. "I'm kill de lion wit' the han' when I'm not so beeg lak you. Go in here an' get dat lion."

Joe got the lion. Got him square between the eyes. And for months Gregory never tired of telling how "My boy, Joe, she kill de lion, by gar."

WHICH brings us back to Pete LaForce and the missing cattle. Pete had spent the fall months in Pine Hills, helping the Renaults put up hay. Pete's wife, her brother, and three or four more of the LaForce clan had gone also. The half-breed is pretty much of a gypsy in nature. They love to make these visits to one another. The men help their hosts put up hay or build cabins or haul wood. The women help cook and make moccasins and 'tend the many children.

Those had been gay months, there in the Pine Hills. Almost every night some 'breed "made a dance." Meaning, that one would ride to the Rocky Point Crossing and come back with a jug of whisky.

'Poleon would tune up his fiddle after the third drink all around and until daylight they would dance to the intricate tune of the "Red River Jig."

There were young men there. Reckless young devils like Pete LaForce and Joe Renault. All sought to out-tough the other. Funds were getting low. The jug was empty. The young men held a council.

Eighty miles west of the hills was the T-Down. More than one of these boys had worked there. They knew of those unbranded calves in the big pasture. Calves that would sell for fifteen dollars apiece to some of the nearby ranchers.

They left the Hills the next morning at day break. Night found them hiding

in a coulee at the east gate of the big pasture. Not a hundred yards from the gate there grazed twenty-five head of cows with big, unbranded calves.

To cut the unweaned calves from their mothers was out of the question. It would take twenty-five men to drive the twenty-five bawling calves. No two ways about it, the cows had to go, too.

They drove the cattle at night and slept during the day, the cows and calves hidden in a deserted sheep shed. The following morning they arrived at 'Poleon's place.

A mile from there was a high cliff. The cows, their calves penned in a hidden corral, were driven to the cliff. One by one, those cows were killed and the carcasses shoved over the cliff to lie in the brush-choked canyon below. Only one was used for beef. Wanton butchery.

One of Gregory's several sons had worked in the Landusky mines and understood the handling of powder. He placed his charges and blasted enough rock and dirt from the top of the cliff to bury the dead cows below.

Easy enough to get whisky money now. Simply load a calf in a wagon, drive to some farmer's place, and sell it. Five dollars' worth of rot-gut liquor and enough money left over to buy tobacco and some fancy labeled canned goods, of which they were so fond.

ALL that during the weeks when we T-Down boys were hunting the hills forty miles away. Those 'breeds had many a good laugh—and many a roaring drunk at our expense.

That was the gist of Pete's tale. He had an attentive audience.

"How come yuh left the Hills?" asked Jake.

'Me and Joe Renault have fight 'bout a girl," admitted Pete, who was the father of three youngsters. "My ole lady hit me with a neck-yoke and purty soon everybody is mix in that. We pull out when we get sober enough to hook up our teams. Those Crees are no good."

Pete was Assiniboine and French.

I was put in charge of the spread that went to hunt those dead cows and locate the calves. Pete LaForce, his brother-in-law, and about five or six of Pete's male relatives, went with me. The latter were to keep up Pete's morale and lend a hand in case we got into a tight. We had our own mess-wagon and tents. I also took Jim Peranteau, a 'breed far above the average in intelligence. Jim was a fiddler of no mean ability, and while he avoided fights, even when drunk, he was no coward.

So. far as possible, we kept the thing secret. Word was sent to the sheriff. Bill Rawlins was to send his stock detective to help. These two were to meet me at the ranch at the edge of the hills. The owner of this ranch was a horse trainer named Andy Nelson, a white man. Much was suspected of this Andy, but no one had ever been able to prove that he was a horse rustler. Because Andy's ranch was on the only spring near the Hills, we were forced to select that place as our headquarters.

Andy welcomed me and my outfit indifferently. Riley, the deputy sheriff, was there. "Purty" Joe, the Long-S stock detective, grinned a welcome from the doorway. Andy came to the point without quibbling.

"Don't expect no help from me, Kid," he told me. "I'm neutral, savvy? I gotta live here and I ain't mixin' in nobody's scraps. Mebbyso I know what yo're huntin'. Again, mebby I don't. If I was tuh go runnin' off at the head, I might be able tuh give yuh some information. But I ain't the talkin' kind. If I was tuh turn ag'in them Renaults, they'd run off every colt I owned. Now that's where I stand. Take it or leave it."

He pulled his hat brim down.

"I told Riley and Purty Joe the same. It's yore ante, Kid."

"All we want is permission to camp below the cabin and pasture for our horses," I told him. "We pay for that. And nobody's goin' to go askin' you any questions."

"Then we gets along O.K.," he grinned.

And that was that.

RILEY was a small man. An old-time cowpuncher. Rheumatic, and his muscles gone soft from too much town life and bad liquor. But he was nervy in a tight.

Purty Joe stood six feet in his socks, was well built, and rode some of the best horses I've ever seen. A handsome gent.

Cheeks red under the tan, white teeth, black eyes to match his hair, and a small black mustache which he constantly twisted to points. I believe he was a cousin of Rawlins. A rather fancy dresser, kept his boots shined, and wore a white-handled gun that must have cost him a month's pay. He shaved every day and packed a pocket comb in his vest pocket.

Dinner over, I left Peranteau in charge of the 'breeds, caught a fresh horse, and with Riley and Purty Joe, left camp.

"We're up ag'in it, Kid," Riley told me, as we rode along.

"Just as well sit at camp, for all the good we'll do," added Purty Joe.

"Why?" I wanted to know. I reckon I spoke a bit hotly. This "Kid" business was annoying. I was past twenty-one at the time but looked like I was still in my 'teens.

Wherever I went, it was always either "Kid" or "Shorty." Pinned to the under side of my vest was a shiny deputy star and I had on my older brother's double-decked cartridge belt, loops filled. My .45 hung in a holster that was once owned by a notorious outlaw. The carbine under my right leg had chafed the underside of my knee but I wouldn't have left that gun in camp under any circumstances because the weapon rather added to my pride. I was a full-fledged deputy sheriff and mighty conscious of the fact. I sure did resent this "Kid" stuff.

"Why?" I repeated.

Riley pointed to a high knoll. Purty Joe indicated a second pinnacle. Each of these points held a rider, motionless as a statue.

"Renault's men," grunted Riley. "The hills is full of 'em. Somebody's let the cat outa the bag and them Injuns is waitin' fer us. Looky yonder. Comin' along the trail toward us."

Five riders were approaching.

" 'Poleon in the lead. Gregory and the others follerin'," announced Purty Joe. "What's the program, Riley?"

"Depends on how they act," replied Riley, evenly. He fished for tobacco and papers and commenced the construction of a cigaret.

"LEMME do the talkin'," he said. "How!" 'Poleon, his big bulk filling the saddle, grinned widely as we met.

"Long tam no see you, Riley," he greeted us. "Howdy, Joe." He turned to me, knitting his brows comically.

"By gar, at first I don't know you! De legs, she's grow leetle longer, eh? But not so moch. Remember de las' tam I see you? You are ride de white pony an' hunt de black tail deer wit' twanty-two pop gon. By gar, de legs no longer dan my han', dat tam. For why you don't grow beeg, eh? Beeg lak de brothair Bob? De ol' man, she's leetle feller, though. I'm theenk you stay leetle lak heem, by gar. She's too dam' bad 'bout dat."

"Wasn't it that same li'l' ole man, the Kid's daddy, that whipped you onct, 'Poleon?" put in Riley, who, probably because he was short himself, realized my outraged feelings.

'Poleon's head went back and a deep laugh boomed out from his wide mouth.

"Ho, ho, ho! By gar, I'm forget 'bout dat, me. You bet she's leeck me, dat same leetle feller. She's fight lak one wil' cat. *Sacre!*"

"And a gun is shore one equalizer," Riley went on. "Don't fergit that."

"W'at you doin' down de Pine Hill, Riley?" asked 'Poleon abruptly.

"I don't know as that's any uh yore business, 'Poleon," said the little deputy evenly.

'Poleon scowled. One or two of the younger 'breeds had their hands on their guns. Big Gregory looked startled and shifted uncomfortably in his saddle.

PURTY JOE and I waited for a sign from Riley. If 'Poleon was riding forth to battle, here was his chance to try his luck. It was a little tense for a minute.

Then 'Poleon grinned. It was a grin that held but little mirth. More like a wolf baring his fangs.

"We don't come to mak fight, Riley," he rumbled. "Me, I'm ole man, by gar, an' de fight she's for young mans. I'm jost ask de question, dat's all."

"And yuh got yore answer," smiled Riley complacently. "That evens all bets."

"Me, I'm theenk she'll be de late spreeng, Riley," Gregory put in. It was an awkward attempt to break the tension but it worked. Everybody grinned except Gregory, who was as solemn as a hoot-owl.

"Yeah, it'll be a late spring all right.

Thought you was livin' down on the river, Gregory."

"Mebbyso t'ree-four mont', I'm leeve on top dat Missouri River. I'm work, cut de dry wood stick to sell to dat Rocky Point saloon. De timber sage hain't so theeck lak she one tam was, too. Ms, I'm cut dat wood, haul heem t'rough de snow, stack heem in de back of dat saloon."

"Uh-huh," grunted Riley. "Good money in wood haulin'. I reckon yuh cleaned up big, eh?"

"By gar, no. I'm come out dere las' mont'. Not one twenty-five cent nickel in de pocket."

Even among the 'breeds, Gregory was known as a hard drinker. His ludicrous look of disgust got a grin from everybody.

"Better haul wood fer the schoolhouse next time, Gregory," Riley told him. "The schoolmarm won't sell yuh no licker ner coax yuh into no poker games. Good thing 'Poleon's got grub enough fer two families, ain't it?"

"*Oui,*" grinned Gregory. "She's got planty grob, by gar."

"Lots uh canned peaches and ketchup and sardine fish, eh?"

"You bet. An' tobacco. She's got planty—"

Gregory's horse jumped suddenly, and the big 'breed was forced to give his entire attention to the animal, which was trying to buck. 'Poleon and the others, whooping and laughing, followed Gregory down into the coulee.

"I don't believe old Gregory's mixed up in this, gents," said Riley. "He's the best one uh the hull tribe, even if he does drink up every cent he makes. Mebbyso he'd butcher another man's beef if he needed meat bad and couldn't git a deer, but he ain't onery like the rest."

"Wonder what made that horse uh his bust out thataway?" asked Purty Joe. I was wondering about that myself.

"The hoss had plum good reason fer jumpin'," grinned Riley. "I seen 'Poleon's nigh spur ketch the pony in the flank. 'Poleon was wise to the fact that I was pumpin' Gregory and Gregory was runnin' off at the head too much. Gents, we're buckin' what looks like a losin' game. Them jaspers has the bulge on us. And if we don't make good, we'll be the laughin' stock uh seventeen counties."

This time, I didn't question his statement. I was beginning to have a hearty respect for this gray-haired, bent-over little deputy. I had seen those twinkling blue eyes of his meet the sinister gaze of 'Poleon Renault, the killer, and I knew that of the two, Riley was the gamer man. He could call me Kid or even Shorty if he so desired, and I'd grin and like it.

IT was dusk when we got back to camp. We were silent and some discouraged. Our ride had shown us that the canyons were still filled with snow and ice. If those cows lay buried in one of those canyons, it would take powder to get to 'em. A heartbreaking job. True, the sun shone during the day, but deep down in the canyons, the rays hit only for a few hours and did little toward melting the snow. Until a Chinook wind hurled its hot breath down the draws and coulees, we were powerless. We were in a bad humor when we hit camp and unsaddled.

Three new men were at camp. Reinforcements. Buck Hale, the first of the trio, was a big puncher from Oklahoma. He had killed a man down there, come clear on self-defense plea, then left that state the night after he was acquitted, to keep from being downed by the dead man's kinfolks. He traveled a heap on his toughness and would tell and re-tell the story of that Oklahoma scrap.

The second was a medium-sized youth of about thirty. Henry Blair. Prize-fighter, wrestler, cowpuncher, miner, gambler. Good at each of these callings. Always ready to grin or fight, quick with a gun and a crack shot with either six-gun or rifle. Henry was as good a ranch hand as I've ever seen. But he wanted to be tough and seemed to be always waiting for a chance to shoot someone to gain a reputation. A likable gent in lots of ways; generous, good-natured, willing to do two men's work, day or night. After the work was over, I have seen him, merely for the fun of it, pick a row with a man twice his weight and whip the man. All this without losing his temper. At the end of the fight, he'd shake hands and buy a drink. A queer kind of fellow.

The third was old Tex. Tex owned up to sixty-five winters that he knew of, and I think he was about seventy, if the truth

were known. Slow talking, slow moving, old Tex. He had punched cows until he got too old for the hard riding. Then he located on the river and ran a saloon. A tough place, that little log saloon hidden among the cottonwoods on the river bank. A rendezvous of outlaws, trappers, half-breeds, and anyone with the price of a drink in their overalls. This white-haired, white-bearded old Texan had somehow managed to live there without being killed or without killing anyone.

It was said of Tex that he had never robbed a man nor cheated in a card game. He admitted that his liquor was bad. He frankly told cattlemen that he always had fresh beef, despite the fact that he owned not one hoof of cattle. Yet he would, during a hard winter, throw open his haystacks to stray cattle and open water holes for the stock.

"Can yuh dive?" Old Tex once asked a stock detective who asked to see the hide once worn by a teabone steak Tex had fed him for breakfast.

"No," admitted the detective.

"Then yo're not apt tuh see that hide, pardner. I shoved it through a airhole in the ice, out in the middle uh the river."

The detective reported Tex to the Association, requesting that Tex be watched, caught red-handed, and sent "over the road." That request ended in nothing save the transfer of the detective. Why? Because he was too much of a pilgrim to savvy folks. No cowman in Montana would have dreamed of having Tex arrested. What was an occasional beef compared to probably a hundred head of starving cows that old Tex would save for that outfit?

My three new men sat about a blanket playing seven-up. The 'breeds were all in their tent listening to Jim Peranteau tease tunes out of his fiddle. The odor of coffee and steak hung in the air.

"Come and get it or I'll throw it away!" called the cook.

I noticed that the 'breeds seemed unusually quiet at supper. Especially Pete LaForce. Jim Peranteau caught my eye and winked covertly. I met him at the corral half an hour later.

"What's wrong, Jim?"

"These 'breeds are aiming to pull out tonight," he told me.

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"Scared. After you left this noon, two Renaults rode into camp. They talk plenty. Pete's scared they kill him if he stay. Someone's squealed and the Renaults know why we come here."

"But we have three new men here, Jim. Buck and Henry are good for ten Renaults."

Jim nodded, grinning crookedly.

"*Oui.* Or ten LaForces. That Henry is bad fighter. Only last month he and some more bust up a 'breed dance. Henry himself whip six 'breeds. Me, I think that Pete is more scared of Henry than of 'Poleon Renault."

"I'll tell Henry to lay off, Jim. Talk to those darned fools. Without Pete, we'll never locate those cows."

"I do the best I can," promised Jim. "Me, I wish we had jug of whisky to put nerve in those LaForce Injuns."

"That won't do, Jim. Whisky makes fights. I'll make medicine with Henry."

Henry got a good laugh out of it when I told how scared Pete was.

"Shucks, Walt, I ain't goin' to start nothin'. Just to show yuh my heart's on the right side, I'll go over to their tent and shake hands all around with the blanket-backed idiots. And if ary one of 'em don't mitt me like a gent should, I'll knock him plumb through the tent wall. I ain't got no hard feelin's ag'in 'em, even if they are a low-down, gut-eatin' bunch uh . . ."

Riley fortunately showed up just at that minute and we got Henry's mind switched to safer channels. He meant well, Henry did, but his methods were a bit abrupt.

Jim Peranteau's fiddle filled the air with lively music that night. Yet there was an ominous lack of response from his 'breed audience.

As for the white men, we sat about our camp-fire and swapped yarns until bedtime, then unrolled our beds and went to sleep under the stars.

Jim Peranteau did not forget to point out our beds to his companions and make clear to them that nothing bigger than a rattler could slip betwixt our beds and gain the tent. This seemed to bolster up their dwindling courage.

WE were in the saddle at sunrise. A shivering, none too cheerful crowd, for the morning was cold and it would take

an hour of warm sunshine to thaw us out.

Riley, Purty Joe, and I rode in the lead. Next came the 'breeds. Tex, Buck and Henry brought up the rear.

Pete LaForce was nervous. His black eyes shifted constantly. Riley noticed this and called to Pete to ride with us in the lead. Purty Joe dropped back and Pete took his place.

"Nothin' tuh be scared of, Pete," laughed Riley. "Them Renaults may be cow thieves, but they ain't goin' tuh risk hangin' by shootin' anybody."

"Me, I don't know 'bout that," Pete shook his head. "That 'Poleon has kill two men."

"He ain't goin' to shoot now, though. You boys is all deputized and are as much protected by law as I am. 'Poleon's got sense enough tuh know that. Which trail do we take from this point?"

Pete pointed out the trail. He seemed on the verge of speaking.

"What's on your mind, Pete?" I asked.

"I know where one Long-S beeve hide get buried las' fall. Close to here."

"Brand cut out?"

"No."

"Then lead us to it," commanded Riley.

Pete swung off the trail and into a cut coulee, the rest of us at his heels.

Then, appearing as if by magic, 'Poleon, Joe Renault, and half a dozen more 'breeds, rode out of the brush.

I saw Pete's face turn a sickly green. His hand dropped to his gun, fingers shaking as if with a chill.

Riley swore methodically in an undertone as 'Poleon and his men drew alongside.

"Lak de roun'-up, eh, Riley?" laughed 'Poleon and his followers snickered.

"Has yore old lady beat you up lately, Pete?" taunted Joe Renault in a tone that was blatantly insulting.

Pete's teeth showed in a sickly smile. His fear of these Renaults was almost pitiful.

Henry Blair spurred his horse squarely between Joe and Pete.

"Say, Injun, are you aimin' to start somethin'? If yuh are, talk up and you'll get a belly full without ridin' further."

Henry shoved out a square jaw. His hard, gray eyes glittered. A grin widened deceptively on his expressionless face. Yet he made no move at drawing his gun.

Joe Renault stared wide-eyed with surprice. Henry's direct challenge had caught him off his guard. Such methods were not the ways of a half-breed.

BUCK had slipped from his saddle and stood behind his horse. He had not thought to let his bridle reins drop, however, and the horse stepped forward to get an inviting bunch of grass. There stood Buck, cocked .45 in hand, his breastworks calmly grazing, five feet away.

Old Tex, his long-barreled .45-70 rifle across the front of his saddle, chuckled in his white whiskers.

"Don't be scarin' them pore kids thataway, Hennery," he drawled. "Not till I borry the loan of a chaw offen 'Poleon. Gimme a big hunk uh that plug I see in yore pocket, yuh ole catamount, er yuh'll never git another free drink offen me."

"Oui! Joe, get back behin' an' leave that Assiniboine Pete alone. Here, M'sieu Tex, take beeg chonk."

He handed Tex the plug of chewing tobacco. Perhaps it was intentional or it may have been purely accidental. Anyhow, that long-barreled rifle was covering 'Poleon.

Riley ordered Henry back and turned to 'Poleon.

"You know what brings us down here, 'Poleon?" he asked.

"By gar, I'm mak' de beeg guess, Riley."

"All right. Then git this clear. Me and my outfit rides on *alone* from this spot. I can't keep you from ridin' these hills, but, by gad, I'll keep yuh from joinin' this party. There'll likely be trouble if yuh start anything. Savvy?"

"Bon jour," grinned 'Poleon. "So-long till de nex' tam we meet, eh? Feel dat win' in de face, Tex? De Chinook win' she's come."

He rode into the timber, followed by his men. We went our way once more.

We stopped at a sign from Pete. Soon we were digging under a shelving rock.

SOME bits of matted hair, an odor, and one tiny bit of dried hide, that was all. 'Poleon had lifted that hidden hide the day before. We went on to the box canyon where the dead cows were supposed to be. After much coaxing, Pete guided us to a

hidden trail that led through the very yard of 'Poleon's cabin. Not a sign of life at the cabin. Yet there were two saddles at the corral. Somewhere in the brush, two of 'Poleon's men were watching us.

"It can't be helped," growled Riley. "I told yuh them Injuns had the bulge on us."

We followed the trail into the canyon. I don't know how the other members of that searching party felt, but I felt uneasy. It's an unpleasant sensation to be watched like that.

The trail dropped abruptly into the canyon. Steep, narrow, winding downward into the dark shadows below. The faint gurgle of a creek came to our ears. Then we reached the foot of the trail.

Beneath the layers of snow, ice and dirt at the head of the box canyon, lay the dead cows. But until the snow and ice melted we were helpless. We mounted and rode back to camp. As we passed 'Poleon's cabin, a dozen grinning 'breeds watched us in derisive silence.

Henry was all for cleaning up on them but Riley got him calmed down.

"No use in all us drawin' pay fer hangin' around," said Riley that night. "Pick a couple uh men, Kid, and send the rest home. Pete and his bunch plan tuh quit the flats anyhow. I savvy a little Cree and I heerd 'em talkin' it over as we rode home today."

Riley was right. Some time during the night the 'breeds pulled out, leaving Jim Peranteau to drive the team back to the T-Down ranch. Jim swore a-plenty as he hooked up and started back. I kept Tex and let Henry go back. Buck beat me to it by quitting. Sick wife, he explained.

"Too much Renault, he means," Riley decided, and I reckon the old officer was right.

The Chinook lasted three days. During that time we located six head of calves that should have worn the T-Down brand. The ranchers who had bought the calves were nasty about it and as we lacked positive proof, we had to accept their story that the calves, yearlings now, had been raised at their ranches. It was discouraging. Purty Joe and I felt like trying out Henry's methods, but Riley and Tex pointed out how futile it would be to mix in any fights.

We were hopelessly outnumbered now and 'Poleon and his men were no longer jocular. They showed sullen faces when by chance we crossed their trails. From pinnacles they watched through field-glasses. Each morning, signs showed that they had inspected our diggings during the night.

EARLY Easter Sunday morning, my pick sank out of sight in a decomposing carcass. The job became nauseating but we kept on. Noon found us with the heads of three cows, the hair still intact on the dried hides. Even in such stage of decay I recognized two of those heads. One a roan with a crooked horn, the other an old barnyard pest whose horns I myself had sawed off. There was a bullet hole square between the eye sockets of each head. To the sawed horned head was a five-foot length of rawhide rope. Pete had the rest of that rope and had told us how it had broken when Joe Renault had thrown the cow.

"Knock off, boys," grinned Riley. "We done got all the evidence we need. It's the pen for the Renaults this time."

I'll remember that ride up that steep trail for years to come. Each of us with a cow head wrapped in the slicker behind our saddle, our hands close to our guns, we rode up out of the cabin and into 'Poleon's door-yard with the evidence that we felt sure would convict the Renault gang.

Not a man in sight. Not a living thing about. No saddles, no fire in the cabin. Tex met us here.

"See any riders?" asked Riley.

"About twenty," drawled Tex. "They had men watchin' when yuh dug out them heads."

"How did *you* know we'd located the heads, Tex?" I asked.

"I was watchin' through Gregory's glasses. Him and me set up there augurin'."

"Gregory saw us?" I gasped.

"No-o-o. I was the one that seen yuh, Kid. Afore Gregory got a turn tuh look, dang me if them glasses didn't slip outa my hands and bust on the rocks. I told Gregory that the T-Down 'ud stake him to a new pair, mebby."

"Where did the riders go?" put in Riley.

"Tuh that ole cabin where Gregory's wimmen folks has bin stayin' since 'Poleon's ole lady run Gregory's gal off with a butcher knife fer lettin' a batch uh bread burn.

Gregory was tellin' me about it. It wouldn't su'prise me if they all aimed tuh high-tail it in the mornin'. They're gittin' scared."

ANDY NELSON met us at the corral. He looked serious.

"I hear yuh got what yuh was huntin'. Gregory's boys come here tuh try tuh buy some .30-30 shells. Riley, if it comes to a tight, call on me. You'll find 'em at Gregory's."

We thanked him, refused the offer, and saddled fresh horses. Then, under cover of darkness, we rode out to make our arrests.

A mile from Gregory's cabin we left our horses. Half an hour later, without having been seen so far as we knew, we were at the cabin.

Riley kicked open the door, snapped on a flashlight, then lowered his gun. The cabin was empty.

Back to 'Poleon's place, riding at a run. Nobody. 'Poleon's cabin was empty. We split up there. Tex and I took one trail. Riley and Purty Joe another.

A half hour later, Tex and I found them. It was Tex who first spotted the glimmer of light some distance to the right, off the trail.

We dismounted, ground-hitched our horses, and crawled carefully toward it. It came from a small cabin nestled in a motte of cottonwoods. Before the door several horses, saddled and ready, pawed the ground impatiently.

"Looks like they're plannin' to go somewhere fast," whispered Tex.

I nodded. "Looks like it's now or never," I grunted.

"Yore right," Tex whispered.

"They won't be expectin' us, an' we'll have 'em covered before they know what it's all about. Are yuh all set?"

I gripped my rifle more tightly, and rose cautiously to my feet.

"Looks like a show-down, Kid," drawled Tex. "Walk in bold like and do it slow and easy. If yuh rush 'em, they might shoot."

"Where'll you be?"

"Square alongside uh yuh. C'mon."

I stepped forward quietly and threw the door open.

A blank lot of faces greeted me, 'Poleon's among them. Not one of them spoke.

"I want all of you gents," I managed to say. My voice sounded oddly husky to me. "Don't try any gun play. You'll hang for it if you do."

The others seemed to be waiting for 'Poleon to speak. I saw the big leader glance toward a carbine that stood in a corner of the cabin. I guessed that he was unarmed. My courage jumped.

"Hands up, every one of you. 'Poleon, I'll plug you if anybody makes a bad move."

"And I'll git me a few Injuns from where I'm settin'!" called Tex from the paneless window.

His rifle barrel was resting on the sill and the click of the cocking hammer thudded loud in the silence.

'Poleon raised his hands. The others followed suit.

THE day of the trial came. We were confident of a victory. It was to be the first criminal case in the newly created county. The jury sat in their box. Then the lawyer for the defense rose to his feet, his forefinger between the pages of a thick legal volume.

"Your Honor," he said, smiling complacently, "I find here a ruling that says it is unlawful for a man, not a resident of a county for one year, to sit on a jury. Since this county is but six months old, not a man is eligible to sit on this jury. I move that the case against these men be dismissed."

It was. A change of venue meant weeks. 'Poleon and his boys could not be held indefinitely. I met 'Poleon outside the courtroom. He held out a big paw.

"Shake? 'Poleon don't hol' de hard feelin'." From his height, he looked down at me, grinning.

"De joke she's on you, eh? By gar, dat ol' law man, she's dam' smart feller. Come, 'Poleon buy de dreenk por dat li'l' feller who ees tak' after hees ol' man."

The Dalton Gang—Frontier Killers and Outlaws

By BUCK RINGOE

From U. S. Marshal to leader of the Old West's most dangerous outlaw gang. That was Bob Dalton's history. . . . A history whose last red chapter was written in quiet Coffeyville by screaming law lead and Death.

THERE were more than half a hundred hard faced men under the roof of the Santa Rosa saloon the night the Dalton Gang was born. Lined along the bar swilling bad whiskey, their bronzed faces glistened in the heat of the close New Mexico night; ringed around the monte table, eyes glinting with fascination as the

Mexican dealer flipped the flashing pasteboards; others dancing in the hall that opened at one side, booted and spurred rangers and renegades, waltzing with painted women to the tune of screeching fiddle and tin-pan piano. Such was the setting for the birth of a bandit bunch whose crimes blazed a record of loot and blood that ended only in the crimson streets of Coffeyville, Kansas.

The Dalton Gang! They were there that night in the embryo, five swaggering riders from Oklahoma who had gathered the trail dust southward to Silver City and now stopped on their northward jaunt for a joust with Lady Luck. To name them when they started, there was Bob Dalton and his brother Emmet, George Newcomb, Charlie Bryant and Bill McElhanie, better known as The Narrow Gauge Kid.

The Kid was already a wanted man. Bob Dalton had, not long since, worn the shining star of a United States Deputy Marshal. Tonight he was sitting in for a fling at fortune, bucking a greaser's game at the monte board.

"It's crooked as hell," whispered Emmet in his brother's ear, his voice not loud enough for his other comrades to hear. But they saw his face and guessed the rest.

Bob Dalton nodded, his eyes narrowing dangerously. The others nodded too, the Kid and the rest. They had all suspected it before now. Bob Dalton was in a cold rage as he stepped away from the table.

A signal passed among the five. If it was a crooked game they had been robbed. And there it started.

Five pairs of hands grabbed gun butts and a sharp clear voice echoed over the suddenly hushed saloon.

"Stick them up, quick!" came the unmistakable order of Bob Dalton, while his comrades at his back swept the surprised place with their gun muzzles. "This game is crooked and we'll show you gents yuh can't run any blazers on us. Hand it over!"

Not a man moved. A hundred hands were lifted to the ceiling. The bartender halted with a bottle half tilted, in no position to throw. The music ceased in the room adjoining. Hissing breath of the grim faced habitues was the only sound, then Bob Dalton moved toward the table and gathered up the dealer's bank. Smouldering Mexican eyes were fixed on the five who now backed cautiously toward the swinging door.

"The first man who moves," declared Bob Dalton, thumbing the hammer of his six-shooter, "stops in his tracks!"

Then, with the speed of trained cavalrymen, the five newly christened outlaws leaped from the saloon steps to their saddles and, shooting right and left as a warning, rode the wind out of Santa Rosa for the hills.

Through the dark blue night the quintet pounded the plains, watching over their shoulders for sign of pursuit. They fogged their mounts into gulleys and draws, their aim the hills, pushing the horses to the last notch until, with the coming of day they discovered when they halted to search their back trail, that they had succeeded in making a clean escape.

"Them greasers ain't got no taste for a fight," sneered the Narrow Gauge Kid. "A knife between yore shoulder blades is their game, eh, George?"

Newcomb grinned and grunted. He was tired. They were all tired after a night ride like the one they had just made. Bob Dalton however, who appeared to be the leader of the quintet, insisted that they keep going for a while, put more distance between themselves and the scene of their initial joint hold-up. For a hold-up it was, no matter what reason or excuse. Therefore the Dalton Gang stuck in their saddles, jogging along, riding the cover, wherever possible, until the middle of the afternoon when they reached the top of a trail leading to a high mesa.

They had left Guadalupe County behind and were climbing into San Miguel.

"What's that look like?" called Emmet Dalton who, turned in his saddle, was scanning their trail with his hand shielding eyes against the blistering rays of the Southwestern sun.

"It's a half dozen 'r more," declared Charlie Bryant. "A posse 'r officers. It's us they're after."

"Come on," shouted the Narrow Gauge Kid, wheeling his horse, "let's ride back an' give 'em hell."

"No," commanded Bob Dalton. "Wait."

Bob Dalton had just as fair a share of courage as the Kid or any of his bunch. It was not fear that stayed his spurs and his

guns. But he had more cunning; and his natural range instinct as well as his experience as a federal officer told him that to ride out into the open and give battle to the pursuit would expose not only himself but his brother and friends to danger, possibly death.

"Let them come," he said calmly fingering the walnut grips of his six-shooters. "We're ridin' on, an' we'll wait for them at the river."

THUS, aware of the coming posse and determined to make it a showdown then and there, the Dalton Gang waited at Sitting Bull Falls, on the opposite shore. Not a head was showing, not a horse moved.

And down the bank toward the water came the Mexican officers.

"Now," signalled Bob Dalton, calling his own shot.

The smash and crack of rifle and pistol shattered the still air of the late afternoon. A horse on the opposite shore screamed, reared and fell. A man shouted shrilly, and posse guns popped.

Bullets shrieked across the water, thudding into flesh and the river bank. The Narrow Gauge Kid gasped and called out huskily, angrily.

"Damn 'em!" he shouted. "I'm hit. . . . You dirty sand lice. . . ."

"Rush 'em!" cried Bob, putting spurs to his horse.

Into the river leaped the mounts of the Daltons. On the other side the terrified posse turned and clawed its way up the bank. Death whistled around them, whining its dreary song of misery and torment. Riding like reckless fools the bandits followed through the stream, up the bank, to halt then and throw a hot fire after the retreating posse.

"C-rack! B-ram!" Another shot to the mark and another posseman tumbled from his horse to go limping into the brush.

This looked to the Dalton Gang like enough for a day. They spun their mounts and returned to where the Kid sat nursing a raw wound in his arm. This they bound up roughly and, mounting, rode out of New Mexico into the Cherokee Strip on their way to Oklahoma.

Once an officer of the United States government, Bob Dalton had turned against the very law he had sworn to uphold. He was now an outlaw and with him his brother Emmet. Bryant, Newcomb and the Kid gave the fact little thought. Life in those days of the bold frontier was never too far away from death, and the law, more often than not, was gripped in the calloused fist that held a cocked six-shooter.

TODAY a marshal; tomorrow a bandit killer, a wanted man. Bob Dalton, member of a large and highly esteemed family of Daltons, was the first to make the break. Because he was unable to collect his authorized fees from the department, he flung his badge of honorable office to the winds and wore his pistols on the owl-hoot trail.

Already one of the Daltons, Frank—appointed a deputy U. S. marshal at Fort Smith, Arkansas, in 1884,—had been killed in the performance of his duty. For three years Frank carried the federal law into the seething border towns until, in 1887—November 27 is the exact date—he was shot to death in a battle against three whiskey peddlers on the Arkansas River near the fort.

Upon Frank Dalton's death, Colonel John Carroll persuaded Grattan, another brother, to pick up where Frank had left off. Grat, as he was later known, came from California where he had been helping his father run a string of horses. As a deputy marshal, Grat was instrumental in placing Bob where he could prove himself worth a star. This Bob Dalton soon earned, for he later was made a deputy under Colonel Jacob Yoe.

With the fearless record and splendid conduct of Frank Dalton as their example, the two brothers, Grattan and Robert, carried on performing their duties as deputies in a manner to reflect only credit on themselves and their department. Bob, however, was the first to resign, declaring that the service was rotten and that graft rode it with a high, wide and handsome hand.

Not long after Bob's resignation, Grat followed suit, expressing much the same sentiments. Grat went to California where he had a brother, Littleton Dalton, who was ranching.

And, for some strange reason Bob, leading his outlaw riders into the Cherokee strip, now decided that instead of going to Kingfisher, Oklahoma, where his mother lived, he would hit the long trail for California to see another brother, Bill, who also lived in the Golden State.

So the bunch split up. The Narrow Gauge Kid went with Bob Dalton to California. Emmet and Charlie Bryant rode for Jim Riley's ranch, about sixty miles southwest of Kingfisher. Newcomb headed for his own claim, some miles east of Guthrie.

And, left to her own resources, remained a mysterious girl, who had entered the life of Bob Dalton down in Silver City, New Mexico. Her name was Eugenia Moore, and she was to play an important role in the drama of death and plunder when the curtain rose on the second act of the gunfighter frontier spectacle.

How this well-bred, mild mannered western teacher dared the net of the law and order clan while she posed as an innocent bystander and worked as an invaluable member of the wild gang itself is one of the mysteries of the early days of the outlaw west.

II

THE Narrow Gauge Kid, said by some, years later, to have then been masquerading under the name of Emmet Dalton for no explainable reason, was working with Bob Dalton at Bill's ranch near Alila when the break came.

The Southern Pacific Express was stopped and the Wells-Fargo car blown up near Alila. Railroad and express officials and police placed this crime at the feet of the Daltons. In fact two man-hunters rode a hot trail to Bill Dalton's ranch and announced that Bob, Grat and Emmet Dalton were wanted. Their names were O'Neill and Smith, sheriff and Wells-Fargo detective respectively. Bill Dalton stalled them off on his front stoop.

"They'll never arrest us," declared Bob. He was hidden with the Kid in a dark room of Bill's ranchhouse. "Why do they claim we did it? And Grat! They'll never make anybody believe Grat could be at Alila and in Fresno at the same time."

"Open the door," suggested the Narrow Gauge Kid, "an' we'll smoke 'em both down fer keeps." His eyes glittered evilly.

"You want to get Bill into this?" argued Bob under his breath. "Be quiet, listen!"

There in the dark of the little room off the main hall of Bill's ranch home, Bob and the Kid, heard every word of the lawmen's conversation with Bill Dalton. They heard Smith of the Wells-Fargo staff swear by the rifle in his hand that he would run the outlawed Daltons down if it took the rest of his life.

As a matter of cold fact it took Smith a long time to get as near to Bob and the Kid as he was at that very moment. But when the two lawmen rode away, Bob and his sidekick bid good-bye to Bill and hit the trail for the mountains. They were going to stay nearby to learn what happened to Grattan.

"Grat can prove he was in Fresno," said Bob time and again as he rode beside the Kid. "What a damn fool that Smith is anyway."

WELL, Smith may have been at that, but he arrested Grat at any rate and put that brother to the trouble and expense of proving his whereabouts on the night the Southern Pacific was blown up. Grat then was freed, and by the grapevine route, which operated as far back as man remembers, Bob and the Kid learned of his freedom, and laughed.

But they laughed too soon, for Grat had gone to San Francisco and there was again arrested by Smith who was determined to get the goods on the Daltons. Twice Smith put the clamp of the law on Grat Dalton's shoulder in the city of the Golden Gate. The second time Grat escaped and slipped like an eel through the net that was set for him. Into the mountains he rode, his spurs drawing blood from a foam-flecked horse as he hammered the trail for Bill Dalton's ranch near Alila.

"I'm headin' East, Bill," was all he stopped to explain. "Take care o' yourself."

Bill Dalton wrote the news to the folks at Kingfisher and one of the many Dalton sisters carried the word to Emmet Dalton who waited at Riley's ranch. Grat Dalton was coming back to join his brothers. It might have been better had he given more thought to the advice he offered brother

Bill. Take good care of himself. For Bill Dalton was not to see Grat again—alive.

While Grat rode the lone wolf line across country toward Oklahoma, Bob and the Kid had already returned, joined Emmet and Charlie Bryant and George Newcomb. The quintet was immediately hard put by posses for the news of the outlawed Daltons had sped north and south, east and west. The railroad and express companies were snarling on their heels.

Smith, of the Wells-Fargo, followed clue after clue, finally engaged Indian trailers to run the gang down. The Daltons snuggled back into a rocky fortress in the hills and watched, waiting. The trail was plain and the posse came along, slowly, with increasing caution as they neared the spot where their quarry must be.

A singing slug from a Dalton rifle zipped close over their heads. The posse stopped. The Indian guide refused to advance another step. The Wells-Fargo sleuth was left to go it alone or turn tail. Which latter he did with bad grace and a vow that he would "get them yet."

"It's that Smith gent," allowed Bob Dalton from behind the rocky breastworks.

"I can settle his play from here, Bob," said Charlie Bryant, lifting his rifle. "Say the word, an' I'll stop his pulse in the middle of a beat."

But Bob Dalton knew that they were bad enough off without killing the Wells-Fargo detective. There were many bands of lawmen on their trail. They were on the dodge. It would be better to stand pat and play out their hand the way he had dealt it himself. For Bob had another trick up his sleeve.

MISS EUGENIE MOORE, affianced to Bob Dalton, was now staying in Guthrie, Oklahoma, where Bob saw her as occasion and the clamoring law pack permitted. Every now and then he left the gang and rode into Guthrie under cover of night.

The girl, so the story goes, happened to be adept at telegraphy and with a fine disregard of consequences and a brand of courage that marked her as a game running mate for a bandit leader, had proceeded at once to get herself a position with the railroad where she could listen to the clicking keys. The messages which came over the singing wires tapped off words to her keen ears, the same words that the operator was noting down on sheets of paper addressed only to important officers of railroad and express companies, big mining interests, cattle shippers and the like.

On one of these visits Bob Dalton got the news he was waiting for.

"There's a very big shipment of money," whispered Miss Moore to Bob, "coming through next week from Kansas City."

Bob Dalton grinned with hearty satisfaction. He was going to make the express companies and the railroads pay for making him an outlaw. That was his viewpoint, and from this point he opened his desperado campaign. Miss Moore was to learn more of the facts concerning the shipment, and Bob rode from Guthrie laughing at the reckless career he had planned for himself and his comrades.

The gang was in its camp near the Riley ranch at night when Eugenie Moore came galloping up on the horse Bob had given her. She was a daring young woman and had made the ride at breakneck speed, leaping from the blowing animal to breathe the stolen information into Dalton's ear. Promptly, a council of war was held and plans laid for the now famous Whorton train robbery.

The town of Whorton, then located in what was known as the Cherokee Strip, was as black as a bottomless pit the night the Dalton bunch held up the train from Kansas City.

About a quarter mile from the station itself were the stock yards. This was a gloomy, forbidding place after dark. Here part of the gang waited, horses tied close by in the dark, men crouched beside the track, guns masked beneath coats.

At Whorton the puffing engine halted, her headlight cutting a misty shaft of white along the track ahead. The town was wrapt in slumber. Only a sleepy agent met the train. A word or two was passed between this man and the conductor, then the trainman waved his lantern, and the engineer moved his hand toward the throttle.

"Take it easy," came a sharp authoritative voice from over the engine man's shoulder. Engineer and fireman turned swiftly at the sound. Two men stood there in the cab, vicious six-shooters gleaming

wickedly in the light from the fire-box.

"Go ahead," cautioned Bob Dalton. "Make her move. But be sure you stop there in the stockyard. If you don't. . . ."

Bob jerked back the hammer of his six-shooter. So did George Newcomb. The engineer reached for the throttle. The train moved along, its headlight spearing the way. Not another soul on the train was aware of what was happening, what threatened, until the iron monster came to a grinding halt in the somber, silent stockyards.

NEWCOMB was first down, leaping from the cab and running toward the rear cars, his guns cocked.

"I mean business," Bob Dalton said to the engineer and fireman as he motioned them with his guns to climb down and march toward the express car. "No foolin'. Keep walkin'."

At the door of the express car Bob hammered with his pistol.

There came the squeak of dusty hangings and the door opened a bit. A puzzled face appeared.

"What the hell do you want?" demanded the express messenger.

For answer Bob Dalton ripped open the door and jumped in, shoving the fellow backward with his gun muzzle.

Immediately along the track came the voices of curious passengers, trainmen, and the shouted warnings of Newcomb, Bryant and Emmet Dalton. Six-shooters backed up these warnings while inside the express car Bob halted between the two safes.

"Open 'er up," he ordered the messenger, indicating the smaller safe. "Open 'er up an' do it quick."

With a six-shooter rammed against his spine the messenger did as he was bid. He did it promptly. Bob, alert to everything going on before and behind him, kept watch. The safe door was jerked open and Bob stuffed a handful of packages into the burlap bag he was carrying. Then:

"The big one!" ordered Dalton. "Open that, too."

"By the name o' the saints," swore the messenger earnest, "I don't know the combination. I couldn't open 'er if. . . ."

"You'll open it—or finish this ride in a pine box," said Bob Dalton savagely.

"I don't know the . . ." the words were chopped off by the thundering roar of a six-shooter. Bob Dalton drove a bullet into the floor plank at the man's feet, near enough to let him feel the sting of the impact.

C-rash! The night outside was blasted with the roar and thunder of six-shooters as the waiting bandits emphasized the nearness of death. The acrid stench of gunpowder filled the car, swirled like the wraith of the grim reaper around the messenger's dim lantern. Someone outside cried out feebly, in fear of bloody death.

"Open it," demanded Bob Dalton, and the man fell on his knees to follow the instructions. He knelt for an instant between brave, foolhardy duty—and death. Then he spun the knob feverishly and hauled the door outward.

A minute later, with his sack filled almost to capacity with bundles of currency and gold, Bob Dalton dropped from the car to join his companions. Into the dark at the side of the roadbed they hurried, guns still menacing, and climbing to their waiting saddles, they swept away into the black prairie.

Nine thousand dollars they carried off. Not a man died; not a drop of blood was spilled. But the Dalton Gang was outlawed in truth for all the world to know, and every lawbringer for a thousand miles around oiled his weapons and saddled his horse.

III

THREE times, you will remember, Grat Dalton was hurled into jail by the Wells-Fargo sleuth, Smith. The third time he went in for keeps. But Grat, after his hard fight in court, decided that jail was a bad place for a hombre who had been raised on the open plains.

Communicating with his brother Bill, he let that loyal member of the family aid him in perfecting a plan for escape.

"You won't ever be known, Bill," declared Grat. "Just get the things to me and I'll do the rest."

So Grat Dalton managed to obtain by devious channels a couple of tough saws. With these he cut out two bars in his cell, plastered them back in place with soap and dusted the patches with lamp black. When the time arrived for the break he

took in a half dozen of his fellow prisoners.

"I'm giving you fellows the chance," he told them. "But when we're out we split clear. I'm going it alone, you savvy?"

They were only too glad of the chance and nodded eagerly.

The night of the break Grat Dalton listened warily, yanked the severed bars from his cell window, signaled to his cronies and led the way to freedom. Straight across the road from the jail he dove for the brush and a certain spot he knew. There he snatched up rifle and six-shooter with ammunition, deposited in the cache by his loyal brother.

It was after this escape that Grat Dalton made his reckless ride to Bill's ranch near Alila and sent word that he was coming home.

Meanwhile the Narrow Gauge Kid had cut loose from the Daltons and on a plea that he was going on a visit to his sister somewhere in Missouri, he rode out of their lives, never to be heard of again.

Charlie Bryant, too, was lost to the gang, but for a different reason. Charlie was coming down with some strange malady and told Bob Dalton he wanted to see his brother Jim, at Mulhall, Oklahoma. So he started out. At the town of Hennessee he found himself very weak and was forced to take a room in the hotel there.

While in his bed he had a surprise visitor in the person of Deputy U. S. Marshal Ed Short, from Kingfisher. Short put the iron bracelets on Bryant and together the pair boarded the train bound for Wichita.

In the baggage car, where Short had seen fit to place Bryant, the Dalton gang outlaw swore aloud and viciously that he would yet get even with the marshal for forcing him to wear the cuffs.

Short laughed in Bryant's face, and asked the prisoner what kind of a fool he thought the officer was.

"You're a poor damn fool, you—," snarled Bryant. "And you'll find it out yet."

If Marshal Short felt any fear of the desperate Bryant or the threat he did not let Bryant know it. He proved Bryant's words, however, and sooner than even the manacled outlaw had expected.

Not a half hour later the marshal turned to the baggageman beside him.

"Say," he mumbled in a low voice, "I just remembered I left my rifle back in that other car when I moved this gent in here to get him away from the crowd in that car. Keep him covered with this pistol, will you, while I go fetch my Winchester?"

He handed the baggage smasher the six-shooter and walked coolly back into the next car, unconscious of the murderous gleam in Charlie Bryant's eyes. Hardly had Short left the car when the baggage man set the six-shooter atop a trunk near his hand, and, with a flying leap, Charlie Bryant was there, the weapon gripped in his manacled hands.

"You keep outa this, pardner," warned Bryant coldly. "Stay out of it and watch me kill this dirty coyote with his own gun."

A moment of hot suspense for the baggageman while Bryant crouched in the doorway. Then the door of the next car opened and Ed Short appeared, rifle in hand. Face to face the two stood, an instant, with death invisible lurching between them against the sway of the train. Then Bryant spoke, his voice vibrant with hatred. "Damn you," he snarled, the six-shooter gripped in both ironed hands, "now you die!"

Thunder shook the car as Bryant fired. Six-shooter hurled its bludgeon of death, and, with the click of the trigger, the rifle in Short's hands roared its answer. Together the two men stiffened, jerked, tumbled forward, and rolled, like a pair of wild flung bags, off the swaying train steps to the track side—dead.

PATCHING together the widely scattered records chronicling the deeds of the wild Dalton gang it becomes clear at this point that neither Bob nor Emmet Dalton were aware of Charlie Bryant's sudden death. These two members of the notorious outlaw band were at that time far to the south; in fact, they had reached New Orleans and were preparing to flee the country.

South America was the aim of Bob and Emmet and they were firmly convinced when they reached that southern city that brother Grat would never be actually convicted in California.

Then came the news, appearing in the public prints of the day, that Grat had been convicted and sentenced to prison. Bob

and Emmet halted in New Orleans, undecided now what to do. Almost the next day came the published report of Grat Dalton's break from prison.

To leave the country now with Grat on the dodge, a hunted man, was to the two Dalton brothers nothing short of cowardly. So they changed their plans and promptly headed north for Oklahoma. This was April, 1892.

Filled with the seething rage against the law, Grat Dalton joined Bob and Emmet with the rest of the gang in Oklahoma and almost at once Bob, the recognized leader of the bunch, succeeded in contacting Eugenie Moore.

She tipped the Daltons again. This time it was a Santa Fe train at Red Rock. With the three brothers had been added Dick Broadwell, Bill Doolin and Bill Powers. A tough sextet they were, armed to the teeth and daring the reward hunters who fogged their trails from all points of the compass.

"It wasn't much of a haul," declared Doolin after the Red Rock hold-up. "We only got about seven thousand five hundred dollars. Shoulda been more."

The robbery was planned with uncanny skill and not a drop of blood was spilled. Surprise, complete and sudden, was the Dalton trick. As they had done at Whorton, Bob and his gang sprang on the Red Rock train in the dark with a great display of pistol and rifle fire poured over the heads of the crew and passengers.

Then while the astonished occupants of the train stood gaping, they relieved the express car of its burden and raced away into the night.

The express company ranted and raved and threatened to send large armed parties with each express car, promising to shoot to kill the first attempt at hold-up. But the Daltons laughed from their hide-out in the hills.

"They'll pay," Bob Dalton swore repeatedly after his raids. "When we get enough to make it worth while we'll disappear."

All through his renegade career Bob Dalton bolstered himself and his brothers with the idea that they were thieves because the express and railroad companies made them such. That it was for retribution only that they rode the outlaw saddle. This was a pretty excuse but an extremely impractical one for with each successive crime the Daltons put themselves only further beyond the pale. True they did make the express companies and railroads pay for the imagined wrongs, but the fate of the Daltons was already sealed, had they but known.

It was a day of reckoning toward which they rode their lathered horses. A reckoning that lay in the crook of other men's fingers, in the blazing muzzles of righteous citizens' guns. But, blinded by their success at the outlaw trade, they heeded no warnings. Instead, the Daltons planned the famous train robbery at Adair, Indian Territory.

The night of July 14, 1892, was a starlit one at Adair as eight men rode quietly into the little town on the "Katy," or Kansas & Topeka Railroad. It was another tip on which they built their plans. Some have said that the tip came from the lips of a rancher in the territory; others claim that it was the handiwork of clever Eugenie Moore. Whatever the source, the Daltons rode, eight grim bandits, led by Bob.

FEW of them remain alive today, but that night when, with their six-shooters gripped in gunmen's fists, they trotted into the shadows of the station at Adair, they were besides Bob Dalton, his two brothers, Emmet and Grat, Charlie Pierce, Dick Broadwell, Bill Powers, Bill Doolin and George Newcomb.

The express hove in sight, its headlight stabbing the night as the locomotive steamed past the tiny station.

Bill Doolin, hunkered down beside Bob Dalton in the shadows, nudged the outlaw chief.

"You take the engineer, Bob, huh," he whispered, "an' I'll take the fireman. This'll be easy meat for us."

"Yeah," grunted Bob Dalton, his sharp eyes piercing the side of the long train, alert to everything alive. "Come on."

Like a pair of prowling prairie wolves Dalton and Doolin leaped through the dark for the engine cab.

"Stick them up!" commanded Bob Dalton as he and Doolin climbed swiftly into the flickering light from the firebox.

"What the hell?" swore the engineer and his pardner together, lifting their hands. "It's the Daltons!"

"Certainly," growled Bob, trying to back

the two enginemen down to the ground. "Get movin'."

As his words dropped from his lips the vast plains night was filled with a clattering volley of gunfire. Crack! Smash! Bang! The bark and boom of pistol and rifle rent the air and the screaming whistle of leaden slugs slashed the blackness both sides of the train.

There was a strange look of surprise in Bob's face as he grimly drove the enginemen along the side of the car. The outlaw gang shot from right and left, surrounding the train, keeping the posse within the cars. For, as they learned later, it was a posse which had lain in wait for them.

Through this hail of whistling lead Dalton and Doolin marched the engineer and his fireman. Broadwell, then, leaped from the dark to join them at the express car.

"Open her up." shouted Bob Dalton in a matter of fact fashion. "Open up quick or we'll blow yuh open."

The messenger, a fellow named Williams, according to the records, saw himself blown to kingdom come and readily flung back the car door. In leaped Bob Dalton, while Doolin and Broadwell kept their guns going to hold off the guards who threatened every moment to pour out of the cars and rush the bandits at their work.

It was a swift piece of banditry. Bob Dalton swept up the quick cash, tossed the messenger's guns out of the door into the dark, jumped from the car with a gruff adieu and shouted a signal to his gang.

A volley echoed with renewed vigor now as the outlaws flung themselves into waiting saddles and rode like will-'o-the-wisps away into the night.

IV

THERE was something like nine thousand dollars in that haul which Bob Dalton lugged with him in his saddle bags that night. And it was the last train hold-up of the notorious Dalton gang. Already Bob was figuring on new fields of endeavor.

"Scatter," he ordered the gang as they galloped through the dark. "We will meet up as usual. You all know the place."

Into the hills, like hunted coyotes, the outlaws scattered.

While the Daltons dodged their pursuers and were driven to their hiding places in the Oklahoma hill country near Riley's ranch, the Pacific Express Company made the announcement that it would pay five thousand dollars apiece for the heads of the outlaw gang. This represented a total figure of forty thousand dollars, for there were eight in the Dalton bunch that night at Adair.

Bob Dalton heard the report of the enormous reward with pride, for it was, at the time, an unprecedented figure. His followers, too, strutted about the campfire with loud boastings, laughing over the success of this last raid and the failure of the law which had set a futile trap for them.

Aboard the train at Adair that night were possemen under the command of Detective L. L. Kinney. United States Marshal Sid Johnson was assigned to the job, too, along with Charley La Flore, chief of the Indian Police, who was backed by a dozen deputies.

It has been said by witnesses to this weird night battle that the only members of the law force to really make a fight of it were Kinney, La Flore and Johnson, who stood to their guns until wounded and unable to continue. The others, so the story goes, found the Dalton lead too hot and either ran for cover or buried themselves behind train seats until the outlaws retreated.

Townspeople were hit by flying bullets. Two of the most seriously wounded were a Dr. Goss and Dr. Newhouse. The former, according to accounts, died later from his wounds. Altogether the Dalton gang had escaped with but a few minor scratches.

After a couple of weeks of track-doubling and dodging around the hills Bob and his band decided to strike for the camp above Riley's Ranch.

Here it was that Riley brought Bob Dalton the letter announcing the sudden death of Eugenie Moore, who had passed away in Silver City. The effect on the gang leader was swift and sudden. He seemed to be deeply moved, but it was the same day when he announced to his renegade band his plan for the most ambitious coup yet attempted.

The gang was hunkered around the fire, some eating, others smoking and watching Bob Dalton, who suddenly divulged his aims.

"Get ready, all of you," ordered Bob.

"We're going to ride to Coffeyville."

Grat Dalton looked surprised. Coffeyville, Kansas, was their old stamping ground. They were known to everyone there.

Emmet Dalton raised the point that the trains would be too closely watched and guarded.

"We're not going after the trains," confided Bob. "We'll make it banks now. We'll get some real cash."

Grat asked what bank his brother intended to raid, and the answer brought swift raising of eyebrows and a rumble of genuine appreciation for genius.

"We'll take two banks," said Bob, his eyes boring into those of his listening followers. "I'm tired of playing around with this risky train business and getting nowhere. If we can get away with two banks at once we'll have enough to get away on."

HIS plan was a simple one as he explained it. They would ride in to Coffeyville, get the banks, and ride out again. Very easy.

Thus it was that the Dalton gang saddled up and started for the Kansas town where they intended to rob the First National Bank and the bank operated by G. M. Condon & Company. Many times during their journeys they halted to camp and make their plans clear in every smallest detail.

Emmet Dalton, who proved to be the only survivor of this sensational outlaw raid, has told more than once how the five of them, his two brothers, himself and Broadwell and Powers finally reached the vicinity of Kingfisher, Oklahoma. The Daltons wanted to ride into the town to see their mother. Strangely enough they decided against this. And the five rode on until they reached a spot some twenty miles south of Coffeyville, where they went into camp on California Creek. This was the 4th of October.

Bill Doolin, George Newcomb and Charley Pierce, it seems, were voted out of the clan before the Coffeyville affair. Therefore, on the morning of Wednesday, October 5th, 1892, the wild quintet mounted horses and agreeing on a few last minute details, rode hell bent for the twin bank robbery they had planned.

This, according to Emmet Dalton's story, was to be their last trick. It was a bright sunny day. The air was clear, crisp and the horses seemed alive with the same daring spirit as the riders.

Death seemed no part of the picture. All the world was a-tingle with the thrill of living.

The Dalton gang was riding.

V

FIVE men on snorting horses rode into Coffeyville about 9:30 that morning. Parading calmly down Maple Street they swung the animals into an alley between Eighth and Ninth Streets. At the end of this alley they dismounted and tied the horses to the fence.

At the mouth of the alley they separated. Grat Dalton, with Broadwell and Powers, headed for the Condon bank. Bob and his brother Emmet, turned across the plaza toward the First National. It was to be a grand coup. A double bank robbery, the first of its kind in history, a thing that the Dalton boys could hark back to with pride and satisfaction.

Each member of the quintet wore pistols at his belt. Each man carried a loaded Winchester. Townspeople glanced idly at them until Bob Dalton and Emmet reached the door of the First National and a man stared at them in recognition. Then his voice was raised in a piercing cry.

The man was one Charley Gump and his cry was warning.

"It's the Dalton gang." shrilled Gump, and, as he cried his warning to the people of Coffeyville, Bob Dalton brought up his rifle and fired.

The bullet smashed through Gump's hand and knocked him spinning but he leaped to his feet and ran. Bob and Emmet dashed into the First National.

Across the street Grat Dalton with his two companions were in Condon's bank and had, with pointed guns, called for hands up. A surprised bank crew froze with fear. Charley Ball, the cashier, stared at Grat Dalton and spoke with stiffened lips.

"Can't open her," he declared pointing to the safe. "It's a time lock. Two minutes yet."

"Stand still," ordered Grat Dalton. "We'll wait for it then."

But the town was alive. That cry of warning from Gump; the shot from Bob Dalton's rifle, the shout of pain and rage. The citizens had seen him running for safety. The Dalton gang was in town!

With a fierce wild courage despite the stirring that he felt behind him in the streets, Bob Dalton, threw a sack to Tom Ayers, cashier of the First National, with an order to fill it. Beside him crouched Emmet Dalton his guns menacing the bankers and early morning customers.

Ayers began tumbling cash into the sack and the Daltons swept a quick glance out the windows. The town was seething. With a grab Bob snatched up the sack and motioned toward a rear door. Emmet and W. H. Sheppard, the teller, backed toward it. Behind the bank was an alley and into this leaped the two bandits with their banker and the loot.

As they broke out the door the sound of shots came to their ears. Coffeyville was yanking triggers. Then before them the two Daltons saw a man. Lucius Baldwin, armed with a pistol, faced them. Bob Dalton fired and Baldwin, hit in the chest, sprawled face down.

"Come on!" shouted Bob to Emmet, and the pair started out of the alley for Maple Street, past the opera house.

As they broke out into the open Bob Dalton discovered a man with a rifle raised. A quick shot from the Dalton gun and the fellow fell dead. It was George Cubine. As Cubine toppled to the dusty street another man stepped into the scene, rifle raised. Bob Dalton, daring as always, spun around and shot again. He couldn't miss. Charlie Brown, a Coffeyville shoemaker, sprawled beside Cubine.

Filled now with a sort of strange sense of immunity Bob Dalton is known to have shouted to Emmet to "go slow." He felt he could fight the whole town. And they headed for the horses.

At this point the sound of firing down by the Condon Bank grew louder. The thunder of guns rocked the whole town. Men's voices were shouting warnings, advice, the sound of scurrying feet blended with the roar of the weapons.

Bob Dalton halted with a hand on Emmett's shoulder. Emmet tied the loot sack to his saddle.

"They need help," said Bob to his brother, meaning Grat Dalton, Bill Powers and Dick Broadwell. "We've gotta rescue them."

So the two Daltons turned back up the alley to aid their comrades who were besieged at the Condon Bank. As they reached the mouth of Maple Street they beheld Grat and his two comrades rushing along, guns blazing, trying to shoot their way to freedom. Most of the guns seemed to be fired from the Isham Store from which the firers had a view of the alley.

"They're giving them hell," laughed Bob Dalton as he saw that his three gunfighting outlaws promised to make the alley.

C-rash! C-ram! Bob Dalton's guns spoke, driving lead into the Isham Store and forcing the defenders to retreat. Then into the alley raced the five toward the horses.

It was only an instant, that pause in the firing. Then it broke out anew, afresh, and with a fierce note of death that thundered in the ears of the fleeing bandits. Like a great storm out of the heavens the lead flew, screaming its warning, smoke pouring from the rifle muzzles in store front, windows, alley entrances. From behind wagon boxes, horses, barrels and signs the lightning flashed as new guns came into the battle.

Bill Powers was the first hit. He staggered, turned and fired. A rifle bullet tore into Emmet Dalton's arm. The bandits were scrambling up into their saddles. A bright red smear suddenly appeared on Dick Broadwell's shirt as he drove spurs into his mount and rode for the open, yelling and shooting.

"Hold them!" shouted a man from the Isham Store door, a smoking rifle in his hand as he searched for more cartridges. "Knock them out of those saddles!"

BUT the Dalton gang was making a run for it, goading their mounts to breast the stinging fire of lead. Then, what was that? Over the hellion roar of the battle came a sudden shout, a hush. One of the riders had toppled from his saddle. Down against a rock he crouched still trying to find a target for his pistol.

It was Bob Dalton, the nervy, boastful Bob, leader of the clan. Emmet caught sight of him across a shoulder, swung his horse and came racing back, swinging down

from his saddle in an effort to scoop his wounded brother up in his arm. A buffalo gun boomed out its doleful thunder and Emmet Dalton slid from his saddle to fall almost upon Bob.

Not far from the two brothers lay a third man. Only now aware of his position, Emmet Dalton raised his face and stared. It was Grat lying there. Bob and Grat. Horses were down. Others were snorting as they strove to understand the terrible mêlée. Men were closing in, coming across the street, toward the alley. Emmet Dalton saw it was no use. Bob was finished. So was Grat. Someone else was lying still, motionless, further down the alley.

Emmet steadied himself and looked again. He had no fear of death, for he did not know then whether he lived or was dead. Why, that other fellow was Bill Powers. Powers was dead, too—or dying.

From one of those still figures prone in the alley dust came the dread rattle of death, the rasping cough from the throat of an outlaw who was to ride the owl-hoot trail no more.

The sporadic bark of pistol and rifle ceased. The cool October breeze whisked away the streaking gunsmoke clouds. The sting of burned powder drifted away skyward.

Someone came riding up Maple Street at the head of a group of grim faced citizens. Across a saddle lay a motionless figure. It was Dick Broadwell. That smear on his shirt had spread. A broad blot of his heart blood marked his outlaw brand in death. Almost a mile out of town they had overtaken Broadwell as he slid lifeless from his bandit saddle.

From among the crowd of Coffeyville citizens stepped a man who glanced calmly down on the figures in the dust. It was the undertaker. His job now. His task to pick up now where misguided ambition had failed.

"Here," he said in unruffled tone, gesturing to some of the bystanders. "Carry them over here and lay 'em along the wall."

So, of the five who rode into Coffeyville that bright morning, armed to the teeth and with sacks for their plunder, four stiffening figures were placed in a row around which ringed the curious throng of citizens making a circle of shadow. In the center the warm sun shone on a gruesome sight. Buckshot and large caliber rifles paint in vivid crimson, and there were many there who turned away to seek more pleasant scenes in the open plains.

Many, however, remained to mark the passing of the wild Dalton gang, to stamp their memory with the morbid canvas of death.

"Which one o' them is Bob Dalton?" inquired a bespectacled old-timer who ambled up to the edge of the throng where four pairs of feet lay extended.

The undertaker grunted amiably and leaned over the prone remains of the outlaw quartet. Removing his hat he brushed a swarm of buzzing flies from the faces sticky with gore.

"This one here," he said briefly, pointing to the tall Bob Dalton, hatless, lean, broad-shouldered and still seeming to wear in his face a certain grim daring that laughed in the face of death. "That's Bob Dalton, an' there's Grat Dalton, Bill Powers an' Dick Broadwell."

Emmet Dalton, his body riddled with law lead, was removed from Coffeyville to the county jail at Independence. As soon as he was able to get about on crutches he was hobbled into court and convicted of second-degree murder. His sentence was—life.

PEACE-LOVING citizens breathed deeply in the promise of relief from the crimes of the Dalton gang. Emmet Dalton was ordered to the State prison at Lansing, Kansas, where he promptly entered the tailor shop to learn a trade. For fourteen years Emmet toiled in prison. It has been said that he became a model prisoner.

So ends the story of the wild Dalton gang, an outlaw bunch whose lives were filled with daring and adventure, whose names will go down in frontier legend as the wayward sons of an otherwise decent family. Guns were in their hands when they started their career of crime and guns filled their fists when the guns of honest men mowed them down.

LOBO OF THE BADLANDS

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

The Kid was born bad! Stamped with the lobo sign of hell-roaring frontier Galeyville. But in that devil's hole called *Portrero Infierno* he found that raw guts and bucking, slamming guns can sometimes blot a Cain-brand heritage.

WHEN he came to Galeyville, his worldly possessions were a seventeen-year-old boy, a rich Irish brogue, a silvery tenor voice, and the cool courage it took to win at cards in that lawless camp. Terrence Larrigan was a gambler and a good one. Better, by a sight, than he was a father to the upstanding son he called Larry. And for his negligence in that regard, there was some excuse.

From the first Terrence was in high demand. As a dealer, every gaming hall in the place wanted him. His ready wit and rich brogue provoked mirth, where mirth was the only antidote for trouble. His haunting tenor ballads drew business and kept the trade in a rollicking humor

that meant profit to the bank. His ready blarney stopped many a killing.

The town was full of money, not a little of it the easy blood-spattered coin of Curly Bill Brocius and his border raiders. It was a case of strike when the iron was hot, and in Galeyville it was hot all the time. It fell to Terrence to extract the wealth of wild and lawless bloods, with pain or without, but extract it nevertheless. So he became a slave to his calling—and his boy, Larry, ran wild.

LARRY was a self-reliant youth, strong, broad shouldered, slender hipped. His jaws were square and hard, and God's open places had placed their indelible stamp upon his eyes. With the curse of youth—too much time upon his hands—Larry gravitated naturally to a gang of youngsters of his own age. Wild kids who patterned their lives after the swashbuckling heroes of roostery Cochise, with special emphasis upon salty guns and horses and more or less wide-flung careless loops.

"Wolves," they called themselves, and wolves they were in the making. Already they had ridden through bloody Skeleton Canyon and driven back the wild yak cattle of the Dons. Already Lobo, as they had come to call Larry, had carved two notches on his Colt's and was dreaming of the day when he could ride the crimson trails of adventure with Curly Bill and his wolf-crew. And it is mighty certain that he would have done just that had not Fate stepped in through the swirling smoke of storming .45's.

Curly Bill had led his rustlers in from another lucrative, if bloody, foray. They were spending their ill-gotten gains in the Owl Bar. Terrence Larrigan was banking a poker game for the house. Curly Bill, drunk and on the mean, was dealing. The table was ringed three deep with thrill seekers, watching the blustery renegade leader game for high stakes. As Curly Bill riffled the cards, Terrence lifted his vibrant tenor in the sad sweet strains of *Colleen o' Dinara. . . .*

> "Colleen o' Dinara, fer me sake alone,
> Ye leave per auld mither, yer house an'
> yer home. . . ."

At a small table in one corner of the place sat John Ringo, that strangely morose character who shared the leadership of the border raiders with Curly Bill. Splendidly alone in the midst of unbridled conviviality. Unsmiling, where mirth, humor and hilarity were worshiped as gods. Disillusioned, bitter, brooding. Drinking more than any other two men in the Owl, yet showing it none at all.

A scoundrel, if you will. A black-hearted murderer and common thief, if one credit historians. Cultured. Refined in his tastes. Yet self-condemned to the unloveliness, the hardship, the low associations of the outlaw trail. Turning his back on family, home, the better things of life, as punishment for some earlier tragedy that wouldn't die. That was John Ringo, perhaps the most dangerous man Arizona ever knew.

Now he sat hearkening to the voice of the singer. His eyes were wells of sadness. His face, deep scarred by bitterness and tragedy, reflected the inner misery of this thinker, this student of books, this gentleman who had cast his life with ruffians and cut-throats. Something in Terrence Larrigan's singing always stirred him, and he sat transfixed.

THE song cut off in mid-stanza, and the dealer's full throated laugh lifted. That laugh stabbed John Ringo like a knife. He jumped nervously, splashed a drink, gulped it. Then Terrence was rolling his blarney. . . .

"Ah, Cur-r-rly, me bucko. 'Tis a favor-r-r, I'd be after askin' av ye."

"What is it?" grinned the outlaw, yet his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Phwhat is it, ye ask. 'Ho, me bye. Tur-r-rn the two top car-r-r-rds on the deck and lay 'em face up in front of ye on the boar-r-r-rd."

For a brief instant the two men looked into each other's eyes. A huge ruffian whose business was murder and a profligate second son of an Irish lord. Curly Bill dropped his eyes, shrugged.

"Sure," he grunted. "Anything tuh plase yuh, Larrigan." He slapped them down with a vigor that belied the softness of his voice. "What about it?"

Terrence laughed, laid the three he held in his hand beside them, ignoring his draw.

"There now, Cur-r-rly, me hearty.

Three sixes to beat. The top av the deck is the place to deal from, me bye. Can ye beat me?"

BLOOD drained from the round face of the renegade chieftain, then came flooding back in a surge of fire. The muscles corded in his heavy jaws. His wide mouth set in a grim line. He picked up his cards, squinted at them. As if by magic, a lane opened up as men shoved out of line. A sigh rippled through the crowd. They had seen Curly Bill Brocius this way before, stiff, fiery-eyed, twin spots of red burning in his cheeks. And they had seen men die.

Now Curly Bill stared at Terrence Larrigan with quivering nostrils.

"You aimin' tuh stand that hand, Larrigan, yuh low-down, stinkin' son of a she kioaty?"

"I cer-r-rtainly am, ye blitherin' spalpeen!" roared the Irishman, and drove a rock-like fist into Curly Bill's face. "Why?"

Curly Bill, rocked to his heels, raised questing fingers to the knot rising on his cheek bone. In his eyes was amazement that this cardman had dared to strike him. His lips curled.

"Why?" he snarled. "I'll tell yuh why, damn yuh. Yo're standin' on three sixes. An' I've got a pair of 'em, myself. That's why."

"O-ho," cooed Terrence Larrigan, and his nostrils were quivering like those of a fractious colt. "So 'tis a pair av sixes ye'd be afther holdin' also, Misther Cur-r-rly Bill? As wan man to anither, sor-r-r, I don't believe ye. Show yer two sixes an' tell the bys where ye got 'em."

Curly Bill smiled about the circle. "Yuh heard him ask me, boys!" And his hands flashed in the deadly draw that had won him leadership of as a bad a lot as ever laughed at the law. Terrence Larrigan was laughing at him when Curly Bill shot. The slug took the Irishman in the chest, knocked him reeling backward, struggling to stay erect. He fetched up against the little table where John Ringo sat with mocking eyes, watching the cruel death play. And it was John Ringo who held the stricken Irishman up, kept him from slumping.

For seconds that seemed minutes, Terrence Larrigan hung there, his face gray, his breath coming irregularly. Then he seemed to gather strength, straighten.

"Curly," he said softly, and his voice sounded loud in the dense silence. "Yer sixes were better than mine. Ye've murthered me."

A cough racked him and a bloody froth boiled to his lips. With a hand that trembled he wiped the blood away, stared at it with fascinated and horror-stricken eyes. Then, with his laugh ringing through the place, he turned, tottered like a drunken man across the room, through the doors and into the night. An instant later the beat of his horse's hoofs lifted and over it, his unimpaired tenor voice. . . .

"Colleen o' Dinara, the moon lights yer grave,
Where I kneel, prayin' God my soul fer to. . . ."

Then he was gone from Galeyville, never to return. For a moment, the awed silence held. Then Curly Bill's bellow jarred them alive.

"Don't stand there like a pack uh paralyzed rabbits. Up to the bar. Drink on Curly Bill. An' if they's a gunnie among yuh that wants another look at them sixes, I'd admire tuh demonstrate."

The crowd trooped to the bar, acclaiming the killer. All but John Ringo. Curly Bill would have killed any other man refusing to drink with him. But not Ringo, who sat there drinking as much now as Curly Bill who was drinking himself into a drunken stupor. It had ever been thus when the big renegade killed. Soon he would pass out and Ringo, cynical John Ringo would put him to bed. It was a formula. And it was while performing that labor of loyalty some hours later, that Terrence Larrigan's horse came loping back to Galeyville with a blood-drenched saddle. Terry Larrigan was through.

IT was a full hour after Terrence Larrigan's horse came back, that someone carried the news to Larry, his son. It hit the kid called Lobo hard, devilishly hard. His sire had never burdened him with excess fathering, but that in no way lessened their blood tie. So, a few minutes later, Lobo burst into the Owl Bar like a madman, paused just inside the door.

The leathery cheeks beneath his low-crowned Stetson were pinched dangerously. His eyes, red and writhing with ire, roved the smoky place, looking for just one man: Curly Bill Brocius. Had Curly been there, guns would have crashed. someone would have died. But the rustler chieftain was dead drunk in his bed and the kid was conscious of the weight of quizzical glances.

"Where's Brocius?" he rapped.

"He's drunk," barked John Ringo. "Tighter'n a bull's-eye in fly time."

The kid snorted, stalked across the room on stiffly pumping legs. Among the riff-raff gathered there were the riders of Curly Bill, hard, heartless men whose leathery hands folded over the stained butts of their Colt's guns. And they would have killed this whelp of their chieftain's foe without qualm, but for the flat-eyed warning to lay off, from big John Ringo.

Now Lobo stood quivering before the co-leader of the border raiders. There was murder in his grim set mouth, death in the icy points of his vengeance-tinted eyes.

"You, John Ringo," snarling, dangerous, the kid bored the renegade with a steely stare. And John Ringo smiled. A cynical, mocking smile that tempered, rather than aggravated the kid's anger. For in just such lethal interludes as this, did embittered John Ringo find surcease. "You, John Ringo," repeated the kid again. "Where's my dad?"

Ringo shrugged. "In the words of the Mexican, son, *quien sabe?* He's gone."

"Dead?"

"Not dead when last I saw him, Lobo. But desperately wounded. I fancy he's with his Maker now."

Lobo's lips trembled. "You—you saw it?"

Ringo inclined his head. "I saw it. Terrence Larrigan asked for his ticket. One of the most sensible men I ever knew, he had one lapse and it cost him his life. A drunken maniac would have thought twice before slugging Curly Bill in the face."

Lobo nodded, his eyes narrowing to twin points of venomous calculation.

"I didn't ask for your opinion of my dad," he said finally, a tremor in his voice. "It's tuh be expected you'd stand by Curly Bill on a self-defense alibi. Terrence Larrigan didn't wear a gun. Curly Bill murdered him. I'm takin' it up from here. Where is this snake, Brocius?"

"Dead drunk in his bed, Lobo," replied Ringo, patiently. "You wouldn't right your wrong by killing a man in his sleep."

Lobo wavered, cooled. "I'll wait," he growled. "But I'll kill him."

"Or get killed!" John Ringo pushed back his chair, rose soberly. He turned and started for the rear of the barroom, and save for a certain unnatural stiffness of carriage, one would never have suspected he had drunk two quarts of whisky since late afternoon. As he left the kid, he flung a low injunction across his shoulder. "Come with me, Larry, and we'll make a bit of medicine."

THERE was something strong, dominating, about this tragically bitter man. Lobo followed him unquestioningly into one of the small private card rooms along the back of the place. When the door was closed and locked, Ringo motioned the kid to a seat, lit a cigar.

"I knew Terrence Larrigan better than you do, Larry," he began, when he had tilted back his chair. "Mighty good metal there to start with. But too finely tempered and flawed in the making. You have the same fine base, son, without being so finely drawn. Life is tempering you now, with this and other experiences. Just the right cook, just the proper timing, will make you strong. Careless handling at this stage will make you a cull."

"What's that got tuh do with Curly Bill killin' my dad?" blurted the kid, but already his killing rage was cooling under the masterful tones of John Ringo. Men listened when John spoke.

"Everything, Larry," said Ringo, kindly. "It was the weakness in Terrence Larrigan that caused this trouble tonight. The flaw in his temper. He has proven in the past he knew how to handle such a situation. Tonight he lost the reins, smashed Brocius in the face. What followed was as certain as that you'll be killed if you make it a feud. Forget your mad urge—"

"A Larrigan don't forget."

"Then rise above your breed, Larry. You're too big, too much a thoroughbred

to stoop to the level of brawlers, killers, raiders. Life holds nothing higher for them. It does for you. Don't cast your lot with camps like Galeyville. Don't brand yourself with the iron of Cain. Don't steer your life with border wolves who rob and kill and lust for the very love of it. Don't turn your back on decency and right before you're twenty. It will ruin your existence, turn it into a hell on earth, even as it did mine. Take hold of yourself and get out of here."

From his pocket he took gold coins, taken from Mexican smugglers in a shameless massacre in Skeleton Canyon. They rang solidly as they slid across the table to Lobo.

"Leather and guns and horses you've got," the renegade went on. "Go where you won't need them. El Paso, Santa Fe, Denver, Phoenix. Somewhere you can get an education. Go to school. Read. Study. Learn what it is all about. Sure, wear a gun if you must. But remember that every man you kill weakens the powers God bred into the heart and bone. Every life you take warps your destiny. Never forget that an honest man goes a lot farther than a dishonest dollar. Make something of yourself, something as far from this hell-on-earth as the pole is from the equator. Will you, boy?"

His voice, ringing with inspiration, was like balm to the kid's injured feelings. Of all the heroes of Galeyville, this silent, brooding man intrigued him most, excited his imagination. Then, too, he recognized the sound judgment behind the renegade's words. He nodded, grinned wryly.

"Yo're right, yuh danged ol' parson," he grumbled. "I came here tuh do a killin'. I reckon I'll go out singin' hymns an' buildin' my loop fer a schoolin'. I hate guns, an' allus have."

"Then never wear one," cautioned Ringo.

Lobo shook his head. "I'll wear it," he said fiercely. "An' when I meet up with Curly Bill, if ever, I'll saw him off with lead."

"You think so now, son," drawled John Ringo, looking long at the youngster, "but if you follow my advice you'll change your mind. You'll rise so far above Bill Brocius that you can laugh and ignore him." He rose, stuck out his hand. "Good bye, Larry, and good luck. Don't get discouraged and turn back. If ever you need help, physical or material, call on John Ringo. He's your friend."

They gripped and the renegade strode to a window, opened it.

"Out here, kid. Don't soil yourself by passing under the gaze of such as they. Ride like you'd stolen a horse and a sheriff was after you. Get out of Cochise and stay out."

For a long minute they stared into each other's eyes. Then Lobo stepped into the night. Moments later he was bound out of Galeyville, the beat of his horse's hoofs rising rhythmically on the still air.

II

FOLLOWING the advice of John Ringo, Lobo rode eastward "like a sheriff was on his tail." At Deming, the cattle were moaning in from the Mogollones, from the Hachitas, from the Palomas and the Sabinal. The pens were full, and all about the drab scatteration of shacks that made up the cowtown, herds fanned out to feed while alkali-bathed punchers circled them watchfully. The air reeked with the pungent cow-stink. In the railroad yards an engine shunted cars loaded with complaining beef.

Lobo breakfasted at a Chink eating joint, straddled his chunky black gelding, and rode out to view the herds and the loading. He looked wistfully at dusty bearded trail hands working with their longhorned charges, at sack-aproned cooks puttering about their dutch ovens or chopping wood from the bullhide wagon "ketchalls."

Something in Lobo's young heart cried out for the glamorous life of the puncher, for long hard days of saddle whacking, for nights under the stars. The free camaraderie of wild rangeland camps, the endless pitting of youthful strength against bitter hardship and ever-lurking danger, relaxation with open-hearted, free-spending young hellions in the vice-ridden cow towns.

That was the life for a kid, setting forth like a knight of old to crusade for the grail. That was the life. . . . But Ringo had said books, school, learning. Ringo was smart. He'd been through the

mill. He knew. Better do like he said. But how. . . .?

Lobo stirred his horse into a hand lope, flashed past a cow camp where retiring night herders waved him a greeting. A lump formed in Lobo's throat. To leave this thing that he craved for a will-o'-the-wisp of education—crazy. Yet what did punching cows ever buy a man? Lobo thought back over old cow dogs he had known, scabbed of hand, gnarled of limb, crippled by exposure, years of hardship, dissipation. Broke and bitter. Derelicts that nobody wanted. Mebby if they'd had education. . . .

Lobo frowned. How could a feller go about loopin' learnin'? It was like riding a blind trail, cutting for ghost sign. Yet it was something to fight for. And ever since he could first remember, Lobo had fought for everything he got.

Ahead of him now a herd rolled across the plain, heading south to the yards. Out of the dust column hazing the sun, drifted a rider's own version of an old rangeland plaint:

"Oh-h-h, the cowboy's life is a dreary life
All out in the rain an' the snow;
I'm purty nigh froze from water in my clothes,
Way up on the Jornado. . . ."

A gaunt, long-legged roan steer broke from the herd, nostrils flaring, eyes boogery. After it yipped a puncher on a short-coupled buckskin pony. Riding slanting. Building a fast loop to use as a scourge. Plying the steel. Now the rider pulled alongside, pulled his rope across the faunching critter's cheek. The lash of the twine turned the beef and the well-trained cow pony wheeled with it, loping at its flank.

Now another rider raced out of the dust pall, his shrill yelp lifting:

"Hang to 'im, Stormy! Ride, yuh ol' hellion! Look out . . . Gawd!"

A sickening, thudding crash. Stormy and his buckskin lurching into a dog hole, careening tail over tincup into a threshing heap. Stormy came up, staggered a bit, heeled his feet. But the horse stayed down. struggling to rise on a broken fore leg, its eyes wells of terror and pain.

White, shaken, Stormy leaped to the side of his doomed mount, a thin trickle of blood oozing from his set lips. He was dazed, oblivious to everything save his pain and the fact that his top cutting horse was gone. Unaware that the boogery roan steer had wheeled and was bearing down upon him like a train of cars.

LOBO LARRIGAN, sitting his horse and thoroughly enjoying the show, took in the man's peril with swift understanding eyes. His spurs sank home.

A muttered curse falling from Lobo's taut lips. The grunt of the outraged pony as the spurs sank home, as it doubled and reached in swift acceleration. A grim race for life. Between a straining horse and a viciously charging cow brute. With Death grinning on the play and the Devil holding stakes.

Now a shot rang out. Stormy, a grizzled, rawboned range veteran, dropped his six-shooter, laid a horny hand on the soft muzzle of the horse that had carried him drunk and sober through rain and drouth, in and out of danger. Such is the bond of affection between a cowboy and his horse.

Now Stormy heard the swift pound of hoofs. His wrinkled eyes swept across his shoulder to glimpse the long-horned juggernaut almost upon him. For the rattle of a spur, his seamed face registered swift fear. Then he stabbed for the gun he had so carelessly dropped in his grief. He missed that first instinctive swoop for the weapon and had no time to make another.

Now the steer was upon him. With an agile roll, Stormy evaded the wicked sweep of those needle-sharp horns, gained his feet and raced away at a tangent, fast as high-heeled boots could carry him. Cheated of its prey, the steer bawled, swerved in a spray of dust and gravel, and again bore down upon the loping cow dog.

The cowboy racing from the herd was firing now, swiftly, inaccurately. But if his leaden darts touched the berserk brute, they served only to anger him like so many *banderillas*. It looked like finish for Stormy.

But Lobo Larrigan was coming. Hell for leather. His loop building beautifully. A good horse, if tired from an all-night jaunt, and a bold kid who liked nothing better than to crowd a cow critter and dab a catgut over its horns. He came quarter-

ing in—fast, made his cast with a cowboy's prayer on his lips. The rope sped out, flattened beautifully.

The steer, one red eye on his victim, the other on this rider bearing down to head him, shied at the loop, bobbed his head, and bawled as the rope slid off the points of his horns. Lobo had missed. Mebbyso too anxious. Mebbyso luck. Still, even the best ropers miss once in a while.

No time to build another loop. With a low curse, Lobo loosed the rope. To hell with pulling the beef off of Stormy's tail. He was close now, too close to miss with his gun. And the beast was almost as close to Stormy. Lobo reached for his .45, palmed it. Mustn't miss. Couldn't miss without hitting Stormy. Gotta hit a vital spot.

His gun was bucking in his hand. The steer was plunging down, the sweep of its horn sending Stormy hurtling groundward. Now the second trail hand plunged up, his curses thinning to silence as he hit dirt and scuttled to Stormy. The old timer spurned his aid, crawled up on his shaking legs. His swift breath bubbled through bloody froth. His face was gray from pain of a shattered rib. His trail mate grabbed his arm.

"Bad hurt, Stormy?"

"Bad hurt, hell!" rapped the oldster, explosively. "When Stormy Sanders needs pap from you unwashed waddies, he'll holler fer it. Where-at's the hawssbacker what saved my bacon?"

He brushed free, stumbled toward Lobo, sitting his panting horse grinning. Now, as the peering oldster neared, the kid swung down to face him.

"Hello, cowboy," he grinned. "Thanks tuh Ol' Soupmeat, that deal went over like a spring waggin through wet sand."

Stormy permitted himself the ghost of a smile as he stuck out a leathery hand.

"You shore said somethin', feller. Never was beef made more opportune. I was gettin' ready fer tuh yank off my boots fer a dyin' when yuh pizened that critter. I'd admire most mortal tuh shake yore paw. If you'd been as pore with yore lead as with yore string, they'd uh been bad news carried tuh my *hairs*. That's twice Ol' Roany's done gone red-eyed at sight uh the seat uh my britches!" He wrung Lobo's hand. "Me, I'm Stormy Sanders, top hand uh the Hatchet."

"Name uh Larrigan," countered the kid. "Lobo Larrigan."

"Wolf, eh?" The oldster's eyes sparkled as he appraised the younger man. "I kin shore believe that. What iron?"

"Maverick."

"Humph!" Stormy grunted, reeled, caught at Lobo's saddle. "I need a drink, looks like. Things is gettin' sorta hazy."

"Here!" Lobo made a pass at him. "Stirrup yore foot an' swing up. Coaly totes double. Me an' you are headin' fer a pill pusher."

Stormy nodded, did the best he could. Lobo and the trail hand boosted him into the saddle before his chin sank to his breast. Stormy Sanders had passed out.

THE sawbones braced Stormy with a stiff drink and bandaged his battered brisket. Then the old cow dog limped down to the Luna House with Lobo in tow. In the lobby they met a compactly built man of obvious strength, a gray cowman whom Stormy introduced as Jake Woodruff, boss of the Hatchet.

"Cross palms with Lobo Larrigan, boss," invited the veteran cowpuncher. "He jest saved you a top hand with as purty a gun toss as ever I see, an' I've seen 'em all." He recited, with lurid interpolations, the events of an hour before. ". . . an' now, if you wasn't hoorawin' me about pickin' up some gun hands, Lobo'll shore make you a hand."

Jake Woodruff bent cold gray eyes on the kid, surveying him from hat to spurs.

"I don't know whether I ought tuh thank yuh or cuss yuh," he said in a vibrant voice and with a sparkle in his eye. "Looks like Stormy's goin' tuh die in bed an' put me to the expense uh plantin' him. Yo're right young, Larrigan."

"Eighteen."

"Eighteen, eh? Larrigan . . . Larrigan. . . . Where've I heard that name before? Where yuh from, kid?"

"Arizona."

"Arizona, eh?" Jake Woodruff's eyes narrowed. "As bad a place as any to be from. The Territory's full uh rustlers an' renegades. Larrigan? Ah, now I recall. Two years ago I sat in a game with a gambler name uh Larrigan. Over yon-

der in the Palace. I got into it with Ol' Dick Thomasson of Cabezo Grande. Dick was drunk an' on the cut. I picked up two of his discards instead uh my draw an' he called me with fightin' trimmin's. We went tuh holster but Dick was ahead by a mile. An' he'd uh killed me, too, except fer that laughin' Irishman, Larrigan. Related to you, by ary chance?"

"My father, sir. He was killed in Galeyville."

"No! Sorry tuh hear that, Lobo. But it's the sure wage of mixin' with cow pirates an' renegades. Yep, I'm sorry tuh hear that fer I've allus had a soft place in my heart fer that gambler, Larrigan. So yo're from Galeyville. A place of wild 'uns, kid. Still—the wilder they are, the better gunmen they make. An' I'm confessin' the Hatchet kin use gunslammers right now. Fifty a month an' grub. Yuh interested?"

"Not in hirin' out as a killer, Mister Woodruff," said Lobo stoutly. "I can handle a gun. I've killed two men, but only because they crowded me. I never want tuh kill another. I don't aim tuh be a gunman. I'm interested in books an' learnin'. . . ."

"Books an' learnin'?" Jake Woodruff's cheeks distended. He slapped his leg and roared. "Smoke me, if that ain't a good 'un. A wild Arizona cowpuncher from Galeyville honin' fer book learnin' . . . ho, ho, ha, ha, har!"

Lobo's face hardened and a flush of rage dyed his cheeks. He turned on his heel, heading for the door.

"Laugh yore jug head off," he flung back. "I haven't asked yuh nothin' an' won't!"

Nonplussed at the kid's swift revolt, Jake Woodruff's laugh stilled and he stared at the youngster's broad receding back. Then he leaped after him, gripped his arm.

"Whoa, yuh dang wolf whelp—whoa up! Proud as a turkey cock, ain't you? You git me wrong, kid. Shore I laughed. But I asks yuh, ain't a man got a laugh comin' at sight of a cowpuncher that wants schoolin'? Shore he has. Forgive me if I hurt yuh. But, son, I'd rather hire a man that wanted learnin' than the best dang two-gun fanner in New Mex."

Lobo's sulky eyes cleared but he was still ranicky.

"Don't put yoreself out any," he flung at the cowman.

"It'd be a pleasure now if I could," he said, and meant it. "If you'll ride fer Jake Woodruff an' the Hatchet Iron, I'll be proud tuh sign yuh on. Part uh the time you'll be on the trail, fetchin' in Mex cattle from Cheewawa an' hazin' breeders up the Rio. But the rest uh the time you'll be at the ranch where they's plenty good books an' a shorthorn schoolmaster hired special fer tuh teach my boy an' gal, both close tuh yore age. What yuh say?"

He held out his hand, smiling invitingly. And Lobo, stepping down off his high horse, gripped that hand. A lump rose in his throat to choke him and his emotion stilled the words that rose to his tongue.

"Good. That's settled." Jake Woodruff looked at his watch. "I'm due at the bank. Stormy, you take it easy till that cracked rib heals. Hand nurse this proud yearlin', take him over to the Mercantile an' let him pick out what he needs in the way uh clothes an' outfit. Charge it tuh me. Fetch him to the ranch when yuh come. See yuh both some more."

III

MORE than a year later, Lobo Larrigan pointed a Hatchet trail herd north from Rancho Jaramillo, in Chihuahua. Black as a Mex, grimed, trail-stained. He was more matured, solider, heavier. A year at the Hatchet had broadened him mentally, as well as physically. Gentle Mrs. Woodruff, Jake's wife, had given him the first mothering he could remember. His mind, like a hungry sponge, had sopped up the intermittent teachings of the Woodruff tutor and at every opportunity the kid buried his nose in some book from the extensive ranch library.

Tommy, Jake's son, was six months older than Lobo, and a pain in the neck to the kid from Galeyville. By virtue of that six months' margin, he assumed a proprietary air toward Lobo that rankled. Tommy was fat, lazy, bull-headed and apathetic toward the lure of punching cows. He and Lobo got along like a pair of strange bulldogs, and save for his respect for the other members of the family,

the kid would have put his mark on the Hatchet heir.

But if Tommy griped Lobo, his sister Bonny provided compensation. Now as he rode at the head of that long sinuous line of moaning cattle, Lobo found himself whistling, thinking of that dainty, brown-eyed miss of sixteen, vaguely glad that he would soon be back at the ranch where he could study the dancing lights in lash-screened eyes, the spirited toss of curly locks.

Outriding that herd of a thousand wild Mex cattle, were tough gunriders primed for the predatory human wolves of the train. Trailing the drags were Tommy Woodruff and Stormy Sanders, who had secret orders to make a cowboy of Tommy by fair means or foul.

The cruel Chihuahua sun lowered behind the Sierran rampart. Thirsty, ugly tempered, the cow brutes caught the scent of water, lowed eagerly, stepped up the pace. Dust enveloped the long line strung out in a trot as the green bosque of the Batepito loomed ahead. The swing men came up out of the pall to slow the leaders, while Stormy and Tommy whooped the drags around the east flank.

Now the thirsty brutes were strung along the creek, drinking their fill and then moving contentedly onto the lush prairie grass to feed. The chuck wagon had crossed and a thin plume of smoke told that the cookie had supper going. Where the cowboys had gathered in the bottoms to drink, water their mounts and smoke, Lobo took no part in the general expressions of satisfaction. On him was the weight of an unexplainable depression. As if he sensed that Fate was dicing with their destiny. Stormy came loping up, his alkali-coated face beaming.

"Finest kind, boys," he chortled. "Water, grass, a nice camp an' not a bandido in sight. Hey, Lobo, uncock yore face. Yuh look like we was beddin' down dry with the sand a-blowin'."

"I wish we had 'em on the Hatchet, Stormy," said the kid, gloomily. "I'd feel a heap better."

"Well," drawled the oldster, winking at the hands, "who the hell wouldn't, with a little brown-eyed filly a-waitin' tuh greet yuh. Shore . . . shore. . . ."

Lobo, risinig to the saddle, jabbed his toe hard into the tender flank of Stormy's mount. The outraged bronc broke in two and Stormy came alive. Too late. A snort and a swift thud of hoofs. Stormy lost an inch, pulled leather striving to get his seat back in the saddle. His hat flew off and a string of border blue blazes rattled off his lips.

"Hang to 'im, Stormy!"

"Rake 'im, cowboy!"

"The hawss has got 'im a hat, now to c'lect a puncher."

They were hoorawing the trail boss to a finish. But Lobo sat his mount, grinning at the spectacle. Now Stormy lost a stirrup. The pony soared, swapped ends, dumped his rider and cascaded onto the flat, bucking at every jump. Stormy leaped up, his eyes full of mad, his hands full of dirt. He limped a little as he pumped, stiff legged, to pick up his hat.

"Damn you, kid," he growled at Lobo. "I owe yuh one fer that."

"Who, me?" Lobo chuckled. "Is it my fault, fellers, if a man crowds his hawss in while I'm throwin' a laig across the saddle? Hell, no."

The kid caught Stormy's horse, fetched it back.

"Here's yore bronc, feller," he grinned. "If he's too salty fer yuh, I'll top him off an' knock down his hump."

"Go tuh hell!" rapped Stormy, amid the howls of his men. He swung up and they all loped into camp. It would be a long time before Stormy heard the last of that ride.

DURING the evening meal, Lobo ate quietly, taking no part in the camp merriment. Nor did anyone comment upon the fact. They had seen him thus before and invariably such a mood portended bad moments for the outfit. Nor was this time an exception.

Night fell. First guard was set. Most of the crew were in their blankets when swift hoofbeats roused them. A straining mustang roared to the edge of firelight, plowed to a stop. A rider, low on the withers, tried to straighten, tumbled from the saddle. Lobo and Stormy leaped to his aid, carried him to a bed. The man was wounded, one side caked with blood. His wounds cleansed and reinforced with a

stiff shot of whisky, the man told a grim tale.

Two days after the Hatchet men had left Rancho Jaramillo with the herd, bandidos had struck at the hacienda, killed Don Fausto Jaramillo and his wife, slaughtered the faithful peons and servitors, looted the great vaults of their gold and jewels, and run off hundreds of cattle and horses. The rancho, without head or majordomo, was disorganized and fearful. Would the Americanos ride back and see what could be done?

"Dynamite!" exploded Lobo.

"Not fer nothin'," swore Stormy. "That'll be the best way tuh lose ten thousand dollars' worth uh beef an' git our hair lifted. Nix. We're trailin' cattle, not huntin' bandits. Who done it?"

"Who? Who else but El Culebro, the Snake of Chihuahua. Bandit, rustler, killer, who from his hideaway in Potrero Infierno, or Hell's Pasture, defied or bought the weak northern arm of Mexican law." Stormy shrugged.

"We ain't lost no snakes."

Tommy Woodruff bridled. "Wait a mo', Stormy. Dad is mighty good friends with Don Fausto and the Jaramillos. They've done a lot for the Hatchet and sure treated us fine while we were down there. The least we can do is to ride down and lend a hand."

"Doin' what?" sneered Stormy.

"We'll cross that bridge when we reach it," shrugged Tommy.

"No, yuh won't," snarled the veteran cow dog. "Yuh'll find both ends uh the bridge washed out. Forget that stuff, Tommy. Neither you nor no man uh this spread is stickin' his head in a bear trap thataway."

"Perdóneme, señor," Elfego Montoya stepped up, doffed his hat. "Your pardon. I am sorry, but my boys and me, we must go back, queek."

This elderly Mexican vaquero and his three stalwart sons had been lent to the Hatchet men by Don Fausto to aid in the drive. Now he stood before Stormy, trembling with the horror of what he had just learned, praying for release from his obligation.

Stormy nodded. "Shore, Elfego. You an' yore boys go on along. But I'm holdin' my men with the herd."

"You're not keepin' me!" snapped Tommy, and rose irately. "I'm goin' with the Montoyas tuh prove there's one man in this outfit. An' I promise this'll be the last herd you ever rod for the Hatchet, Stormy. When I tell Dad what kind of yellow coyote you turned out tuh be, he'll run yuh outa the country."

Stormy turned white with anger, eyed the bull-headed youngster with glittering eyes.

"I think mebby I know Jake Woodruff better'n you do, Tommy," he said stiffly. "But mebbyso not. I'll take chances on that. You leave this herd an' yore fired. An' if Ol' Jake don't like them orders, he kin write it out, an' welcome."

"Which he will, yuh damned ol' cap-an'-ball mossyhorn," sneered Tommy. "Any uh you waddies with the guts of a louse will haul end outa here an' foller me."

With the Montoyas, he darted to the rope corral to loop a mount from the remuda. Several of the trail-hands twisted nervously, but none of them responded. Now with plunging horse and a last cynical snort at the sober-faced crew, Tommy led the way south into the night. No man spoke until all sounds of their going had faded. Then. . . .

"I'm a damned ol' fool, I reckon," mused Stormy, sadly. "Jake'll never forgive me fer lettin' his whelp faunch off thataway. I'd orta eared him down an' hogtied 'im. As it is—"

"As it is," echoed Lobo, "there's nothin' left but fer me tuh set forth tuh fetch 'im back. It ain't too hard tuh figger. Tommy went plumb loco over that little niece uh the Jaramillos."

"Well," Stormy glared. "What the hell's holdin' yuh?"

Lobo grinned. "You 'lowed you'd fire the man that follered Tommy."

"Man, yes," conceded the oldster, his eyes sparkling. "But I didn't say nothin' about boys. Ride yore hawss to sore hoofs an' fetch that rooster back. I'll hold the herd here on good grass till yuh git back."

THOUGH Lobo bestrode a good horse and pushed him hard, he failed to overhaul Tommy and the Montoyas. All night he rode, reaching Rancho Jaramillo in the gray dawn. The place was a sham-

bles. The fierce savagery of the bandits was everywhere apparent. All the buildings had been looted and fired inside. The strong vaults in the basement of the main hacienda had been blown and looted of the fortune that was legend in Chihuahua. The dead were laid out for burial in the little ranch chapel and a sad-faced priest was saying mass for their souls.

But of Tommy and the Montoyas there was no sign, nor had anyone seen them. All day Lobo hung about that place of sadness, pacing like a tiger, torn with doubt. The priest, noting his agony of mind, comforted him.

"Why concern yourself, my son," he said kindly, "about something in the hands of *El Señor Dios?* Your troubles pale into insignificance beside those of these poor folks who have lost their all. Come, let me show you."

He led Lobo to a rude ramada, hurriedly erected outside a once comfortable adobe, fired by the ruthless hands of the raiders. There he presented the American to Señora Montoya, wife of Elfego. The bandidos had ravished her home and set it afire inside, leaving her in her bed to roast alive. A hopeless cripple, she must surely have perished save for good friends who carried her bed outside and erected a shelter over it. Yet this calm-faced woman was happy, hopeful of the time when her husband and boys would return from the cattle drive with money enough to finance her operation, the operation that would restore the use of her limbs. Yes, and thankful that her men folks had been away when disaster struck.

Lobo came away from that ramada with an ache in his heart. He ate his dinner, prepared over open fires by sorrowing women, then spread his saddle blanket in the bosque willows and slept. Night had fallen when he awoke. Another quick meal and he hit the saddle. Tommy and the Montoyas had not come in and the kid felt certain that they must have repented and returned to Stormy.

Day was breaking when he again crossed the Batepito. The trail herd was gone. A newly dug grave at the camp site told him that the wounded Mexican had died and been buried. For a long time Lobo sat his horse there, staring with thoughtful eyes at the dead campfire. What had happened to make Stormy break his word? At last the kid from Galeyville rode on, with the uneasy feeling he was leaving trouble that needed his attention.

ALL day he rode and at nightfall, weary, hungry, caught the gleam of a campfire. A half hour later he swung down at the rope corral of the Hatchet trail outfit, jerked his hull. The jingler came out of the shadows, voicing a nasty laugh.

"Oh, Lobo. H'are yuh feller?"

The kid gasped. It was a man they had left at the Hatchet home ranch. He expressed surprise.

"Yeah," laughed the man. "Figgered you'd be some surprised. When Stormy sent up word that he was short handed an' in trouble, we come lopin' down."

"Tommy get in?"

The man swore, lifted his voice. "Here's Lobo, fellers. He's askin' did Tommy get in."

A man rose at the fire. It was Jake Woodruff. His mouth was set in a granite mold as he peered through the darkness. Logo strode to meet him, his mind vaguely troubled. Jake eyed him without a smile.

"Where have you been, Lobo?"

"At Rancho Jaramillo," said the kid, puzzled at the cow man's chill mein. "Why?"

Woodruff lifted his brows. "Just wonderin'. What'd you do down there?"

"Nothin' I could do, Mister Woodruff. I waited all day fer Tommy tuh show an' then rode back. Why all the questionin'? Where's Stormy?"

"Stormy's not with the Hatchet no more," said the cow man stiffly. "He saved me the trouble uh firin' him by quittin'. He let me down. His orders was tuh push them beefs through. Instead, he holds 'em on the Batepito an' sends hands south tuh mix in business that was none uh his own."

"But," commenced Lobo, but the cow man cut him short.

"No ifs, ands or buts about it, Larrigan. When a man works fer me, he does like I say or else he goes."

Lobo jerked out the makin's, wrapped up a brownie and dragged down a lungful of smoke. A grim smile played about his lips as he thought of Stormy. It was

like the salty old hellion to take the onus of an affair that was patently Tommy's; to play the game without squawking, then when he was no longer useful, cut his string. The kid spat.

"You guess bad as most, Jake," he said sourly. "No use for a man tuh tell yuh the plain truth cause yuh wouldn't believe him. Someday you'll know what a good man you've lost. But long as yuh feel like yuh do, make out mine."

Jake Woodruff winced, dug out pencil and paper and scribbled an order. As he handed it over, his eyes held slow anger —and something else.

"There it is, Larrigan," he said stiffly. "If yuh never show on the Hatchet again, it'll be too soon. If yuh ever see Stormy, he'll tell yuh why. Get your horse and ride. So long."

"So long!" said Lobo, and turned on his heel. He caught up his Coaly horse, threw on his saddle and rode, the canker of bitterness eating at his heart. When sounds of his going were stilled, Jake Woodruff sighed.

"Proud an' bold as a yearlin' bull," he said, to no one in particular. "It taken nerve fer him tuh ride right in an' face us thataway. He may be a wolf-whelp of a tinhorn gamblin' man, but by the hinges uh hell, he's got guts."

IV

WITH his few personal effects tied in his saddle roll, Lobo Larrigan sat his horse in the moonlight, taking a last sad look at the Hatchet ranch house. For the first time in his life he understood the meaning of homesickness. Inside that rambling adobe were all the things he'd dreamed of: a mother, books, education—a girl. Something stabbed him as he thought of Bonny, slender, brown eyed, proud as Lucifer. He wondered if he'd ever see her again, decided not. A feller had to keep his pride, even if. . . .

With an ache in his heart, he rode on his way, heading for Deming. In the morning he cashed his order at the bank and headed west for Galeyville. Telling himself what a fool he'd been to think he could ever follow John Ringo's advice; that swift-moving adventure trails were good enough for him. And knowing in his heart that he lied.

Ten hours later he was in Rinconada, well on his way to old haunts. He put Coaly in a feed barn, stepped into a saloon, and had a drink. The bartender bought one. The hard liquor cut the alkali, warmed Lobo's innards. For the first time in days, he found himself laughing. He downed another. And all the wild recklessness of his nature blossomed.

He crossed to the faro bank, bought a hundred dollars' worth of markers, placed a few recklessly. And won. He let his winnings ride and laid down other bets. And lost. Thus it went for an hour. Winning small bets, losing big ones. At ten o'clock that night he was quite drunk and careless that he had lost the savings of a year. Broke. Too broke to buy his supper or pay his stable bill.

The games were languishing and the reason became apparent when word came that Blas Lucero was trimming a young Mexican who had lit in town with a pot of gold. Along with others, Lobo trailed down to Lucero's dump of questionable repute.

The moment he entered the place, Lobo felt the pulse-quickening current of excitement running through the crowd that hemmed a poker table. Four men had bought chips in that game, a dark-skinned, slender breed, a thick bodied plug-ugly with glittering close-set eyes, a good-looking young Mexican, and a grizzled cow dog. The breed, half negro, half Mexican, was Blas Lucero. And the importance of the play was indicated by the fact that it had lured him from his easy chair at the bar end, from his perfumed cigarets, from the bold floozies who regaled him on his infrequent returns to his dump from questionable trips into Mexico.

Blas Lucero, with more in his head than the gold teeth he exposed in a continual grin, was known to be linked with murder, rustling and smuggling. Yet always kept himself adroitly covered. His slender smoothness and lidless black eyes were suggestive of a snake, which his enemies called him. Snake Lucero. Savage, intelligent, clever, he made his money in noctural ways, and from the looks of gold, silver and chips before him, was mak-

ing more at the expense of the men there.

At Lucero's left sat neckless, murky eyed Brazos Barger, his bouncer and bodyguard. Brazos was named, not for a range, but for the massive forearms and thick steel fingers that could garrote a man like stringing fish. A killer, with the body of a giant and the furtive calculating mind of a stalking beast.

But, strangely, neither Lucero nor Barger interested Lobo Larrigan. It was the pair with whom they were gaming. Eeling into the crowd, the kid gasped as he found himself staring at the profile of an old cow dog who contemplated his cards owlishly. It was Stormy Sanders. And at his right, flushed with whisky and excitement, sat Ramon, youngest son of Elfego Montoya.

AS Lobo looked, Ramon shoved out a handful of coins to Stormy, who was short. Stormy and Ramon Montoya. A top hand and a Mex vaquero. Lousy with money. How come? An ugly thought took form in Lobo's mind as he pictured the shambles he had seen at Rancho Jaramillo short days ago. What the hell?

Eyes narrowed, brain buzzing with unanswerable questions, Lobo edged to the back of Ramon's chair. Stormy looked up, his eyes locking with Lobo's. In the oldster's glance was neither enmity, friendship, nor yet a message. Only trouble, stark scourging trouble, lay in those faded gray eyes. And the kid went sick with nausea. In that moment he felt that his worst surmise was correct.

The presence of a man behind his chair seemed to nettle Ramon. He flung about. . . .

"Caràcoles, cabrón!" he hissed, with liquor-inspired adjectives. "My luck she ees bad enough weethout a damn cow ponch she tip my hand. *Vamos!* Ah . . . eet ees our Lobo Larrigan, eh? Pardon, my frien'. You are ver' lucky, I do not steek you een the belly." And his hand fell from his sash.

Bitterness and whisky spoke in Lobo. "Don't ever pull a knife on me, Spick," he spat. "'Cause when yuh do, you've made yore last skunk tracks."

The Mexican turned a dirty white, but Stormy beat him to the retort.

"What yuh mean by that crack, feller?" he growled.

"Let it ride!" snarled Lobo. "But the same goes fer you. I never thought it of yuh, Stormy. I'm no angel, but I've got my limit."

Stormy looked puzzled, but the Mexican was laughing.

"Trouble, *amigo,*" he suaved, "ees blood brother to Ramon Montoya. I live weeth it, love it, savvy? If you weesh trouble, I give it gladly. A fight weeth knife, weeth gon, weeth—"

"Ow, say," Stormy began—

"Say," sneered Blas Lucero, with lifting eyebrows, "what is this, a poker game or—"

At mention of Lobo's name, Larrigan, the breed's eyes had lighted with interest. Then he bent a sly, half lidded glance on the kid from Galeyville. Lobo caught that glance and misinterpreted it. But his swift anger was cooling and he saw no reason in provoking the breed's ire. Stormy was cautioning Ramon.

"Set down an' play cards, Ramon. You're drunk. Or if yuh've got enough, we'll hit the hay. Make up yore mind."

Montoya bowed sneeringly to Lobo. "Excuse eet, señor. Until I feeneesh the game. After that. . . ."

He sat down abruptly, swung back to the game. Lucero dealt him a hole card. Lobo got a peek at it and grinned. Black ace. Ramon took a look, met a five-hundred-dollar bet and raised it a thousand. Stormy quit. Blas Lucero eyed his hole card, saw the bet and went it a thousand better. Brazos threw up his hand. It was Ramon and Lucero for it.

Ramon shoved out his stack and Lucero stepped it up two thousand and the young Mex laughed as he reached into his pocket. Stormy tried to stop him.

"Not that, Ramon. He can't raise yuh fer more'n yore stack. Make it a showdown, but fer Gawd's sake don't flash that."

"Porque?" Ramon permitted himself the ghost of a smile. "For why, señor? Eet ees lucky money of the so great value. Beautiful, Marvelous! *Mira, amigos!* Look!"

He whipped out a saffron silk scarf, opened it carefully, spread out its folds. In its center, gleaming like a vivid eye,

lay a soft sphere of crimson. It seemed to palpitate, stealing the yellow rays of the lamp light and paying them boldly back in limpid drops of pigeon blood. A perfect ruby of tremendous size and exquisite fire.

"Dios!" Blas Lucero laid down the cards and peered at the wonderful stone, his unblinking eyes narrowing upon Ramon. "A ruby. Where, my friend, did you get this one?"

Ramon cackled drunkenly. "Ha, Lucero, you weesh to know, eh?" "Ow much for thees stone."

"Pie-eyed young fool!" growled Stormy to Lobo. "It's worth a fortune where such things is sold. If Lucero buys, it'll be fer a song."

Lucero's face had hardened as he stared at the stone. In his eyes was a mixture of reactions, puzzlement, rage, fear. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind and held silent. A strange silence gripped the room, with the crowd edging close to gaze at the bauble.

NOW the roar of horses sounded outside. Leather creaked. Heavy boots slogged down the corridor. A half dozen dusty, bearded Mexicans burst in, their leader bawling for Blas Lucero. The breed rose, his face registering annoyance.

"Pardon," he bowed. "I will speak to these men and return."

For several moments he hearkened while the leader of the riders whispered to him, swiftly, excitedly. Now the new arrivals, heaviliy armed and bandaleroed, stalked to the short bar. Lucero came back to the poker table, wrapped in sullen contemplation. As he dropped into his seat, he flashed a furtive message to Brazos Barger. He reached for the ruby, laid it in his palm. Against the blue-black of his skin, it gleamed like a blood drop on black velvet.

"In all of North Mexico," he said softly, and his voice was like a reptilian hiss, "there is no other like this except at Rancho Jaramillo. How came you by this one, señor?"

There was a hard, bitter edge to Ramon's laugh. "For a price, Señor Lucero, I weel tell you. There are many more like thees one where she come from. But eet take a man," he shuddered, "—to get them."

"How much?" Lucero's query stabbed the silence like a knife.

"Ten thousand dollars, señor."

"Wagh!" exploded Stormy. "It's worth a heap more than twice that."

"What's the diff?" sneered Lobo. "Easy come; easy go. Blood money's unlucky money, feller."

Stormy winced, searched Lobo's face but said nothing. Blas Lucero counted out the money, his yellow-bordered eyes flicking into the glittering, pit-black ones of Brazos Barger. Trouble rode that glance and Lobo tensed for it. For a moment he was minded to leave the place, but something bigger than himself held him back. He looked at Stormy and knew why. He couldn't let the old cow dog down, no matter what he had connived at. The kid let his hand fall to his gun, but snapped it away as something cold and round bit into his kidney.

Lobo half turned. A Mex stood behind him, hand pocketed, gun jutting. It was one of the new arrivals. On the man's face was a daring smile that breathed of death. And ringing the table like buzzards at a feast, were his companions, alert, ready. Blas Lucero was a man of foresight.

Now Ramon matched Lucero's bet. The cards flipped out. With an ace showing, Ramon bet a thousand, was raised five hundred, which he saw. More cards. Ramon's hand showed ace and nine, Lucero's a king, trey. The bet went the same way, Ramon betting a thousand, Lucero raising five hundred, and the Mexican seeing it. Another round fetched Ramon a jack, Lucero a trey. Pair of treys bet five thousand, and Ramon caught his breath as he shoved out a covering bet. Last cards. Ramon caught an ace, Lucero a king. The breed's kings anad treys bet the size of Ramon's stack—two thousand. Ramon covered. It was in the lap of the gods.

Montoya flipped over his hole card. It gave him three aces, a nine and a jack. Lucero needed a king or a trey down to win.

"Valgame," muttered Ramon, trembling. "Turn up your card, señor."

Lucero smiled thinly, palmed his hole card. What he did then was crude, perhaps purposely so. For he was well

hemmed by his killers and with everything to gain by a ruckus. A blind man could have seen him change cards as he drew from his sleeve and slapped down the needed king.

Ramon bounced to his feet, his finger leveled.

"Fullero!" he barked. "Card sharp! Thief! From your sleeve, I saw you—"

Lobo's eyes flicked to Stormy's, his lips forming a message. . . .

"Snake sign! You take the breed an' get Ramon out. I'll handle Brazos an' try fer the ruby."

With that deadly compression increasing at his kidney, Lobo corded his fists, whirled, smashed the man behind him to the floor. The pocketed gun exploded, seared a welt along Lobo's back. Now the kid from Galeyville palmed his .45, rocked the hammer. The light vanished in a clangorous crash of falling glass. Darkness invaded that room, a-snarl now with the curses of battling men, the crash of guns, the solid impact of flesh against flesh.

V

FEARFUL of his targets, Lobo pouched iron, dove toward the spot where the ruby had lain. As he lunged, he swung a murderous blow that should have floored Brazos. But the man wasn't there. The kid sprawled across the table, groping for the ruby, just as someone upended the board, spilling man, stone and coins to the floor.

Lobo struggled to his knees but a hurtling body smashed him down again. With flailing fists, the kid lammed the man to the floor, clubbed him limp, then reeled up, his sobbing breath lost in the din of conflict. He stumbled blindly ahead toward the rumbling rangeland curses of Stormy Sanders.

A swinging chair knocked him flat. Half stunned, he sat there, struggling to get his bearings. Brain clearing, he cast off the entangling furniture, came stiffly up. A shadowy figure locked with him. Lobo bumped his fists viciously, smashed the shape back. A flying bottle clipped his face, shivered against the wall. Somebody tripped him. Out on his feet, off balance, he teetered blindly, crashed into a swinging panel. There, caught in the tide of struggling bodies, he was swept into a corridor, smashed into a wall, through another door and into the sweet air of outside.

For an instant Lobo held erect, back against a wall. Then he slowly, slowly sank down. A swarm of battlers, finding themselves all of Lucero's faction, wheeled and raced again into that blind battle. Voices receded to dim mutterings.

Lobo passed out for a few seconds. Then the air was stinging his nostrils and he snapped out of it. He was on his back, looking at the stars. He groaned, slid to one elbow. A groan answered him.

"That you, Lobo?" It was the cracked voice of Stormy.

"Feller," spat the kid, disgustedly. "I figgered I was a wolf. I turned out tuh be a lamb. Where's Montoya?"

"Search me," grunted the oldster. "Ow-w-w-w-! Some sufferin' son sunk a gun sight inter my conk an' a knife in my briskit. You glaum that ruby?"

"Like hell. But I shore got a bump on my head that feels like one. Where we at?"

"In the lane behind Lucero's, looks like. Where they gather up the stiffs the mornin' after. An' we better be leavin' or we'll wind up in boothill. Kin yuh walk?"

"I reckon so . . . ow-w-w-w!"

They lurched up, reeled together and moved painfully down the lane. Where the gurgle of water denoted the crossing of the town *zanje,* or ditch, they flopped, buried their heads in the cool flow.

"I knowed somethin' like this'd happen," spat Stormy at length. "Told Ramon so. But he had tuh have a run fer his money an' figgered tuh git it here. Got his belly full uh mescal an' 'lowed he wasn't afeared uh nothin'. Trustin' to a sticker in a tight like that. Humph! Hope he's satisfied."

"Whatever he got," gloomed Lobo, "he had comin'. An' the same goes fer you, yuh dang pirate. Why I throwed in with the likes uh you in this shindig is more'n I kin figger. If I'd uh suspicioned you was mixed up in that Jaramillo raid, the night I rode south—"

"Hey!" yelped Stormy. "Whoa up! What yuh mean by them dirty cracks? Spill yore guts before I—"

"What do I mean?" sneered Lobo. "I ride down yonder, find men, wimmen an' kids lyin' dead an' the rancho burnt. Then

I ride here an' find you playin' with Jaramillo jewels. Skunk oil is what I mean. I never thought you'd make snake tracks when yuh walk, Stormy."

AS the weight of Lobo's words stung him, Stormy grunted, held silent. Then he chuckled, ground off a bait of eatin' tobacco and opened up:

"Looks bad, don't it kid? But it ain't. I wondered what was eatin' on yuh an' don't blame yuh, none whatever. Yo're wrong as hell. But before I tell yuh why, tell me what you're doin' here. Why ain't you with the herd?"

Lobo spat. "I quit. Saved Jake from firin' me. He hates my guts, Stormy, an' when I asked him why, he told me you'd say why when we met."

Stormy swore. "I figgered it'd be thataway. I quit, too, though I'd rather uh lost a laig than that job. Stormy Sanders won't whine for no man's job."

"Me too," agreed Lobo. "Tell me. . . ."

"You never ketched up with Tommy an' the Montoyas," commenced the oldster. "An' they's a good reason why. They never headed fer the rancho. Ol' Elfego Montoya led 'em off on as crazy a chore as you'd care tuh think of. It seems the ol' man found a feller near dead on the range, two years ago. Toted him home an' pulled him through. The feller was a bandit, member of the outfit callin' theirselfs the Snakes. He'd had some fallin' out with the leader, feller name uh Culebra, an' they shot him down, leavin' him fer dead. When this feller gits on his feet an' before lightin' out fer parts unknown, he draws Elfego a map of the bandit hole-up, a place called Potrero Infierno, or Hell's Pasture."

"How'd yuh find this out?" asked Lobo, skeptically.

"I'm comin' tuh that directly. Elfego never said nothin' about havin' this map, not wishin' tuh go in among the worst killers in Chihuahua. That is, not till word come up that them same bandits had looted Rancho Jaramillo. After he'd started back to the rancho, he thought uh the map, drug it out of a tobacco sack, showed it tuh Tommy an' his three sons. They agreed they couldn't do the Jaramillos no good, them bein' dead. But decided they might slip in there an' lift the loot, ketchin' the bandits unaware. A plumb loco idea."

"Go on, Stormy!" Lobo's breath was coming fast and his eyes were hard and gleaming.

"Well," continued Stormy, "they found the trail an' followed it into Hell's Pasture. Done a good job of it, an' found the bandits celebratin' with mescal an' marijuana. They found where the loot was kept an' was into it before they was discovered. I don't know what happened exactly, 'cause I wasn't there. An' Ramon wouldn't talk about it. Musta been somethin' spooky, 'cause it got all of 'em except him, an' he's sorta boogery."

Lobo started. "Yuh mean," he asked in a horrified voice. "That. . . .?"

"Shore, that's it. Elfego got away fer a piece, too bad hurt tuh travel. Before he died, he give Ramon the map. When the boy come to our camp, he was half crazy. Gradually I drawed the yarn outa him. Then Jake Woodruff come down an' I quit. Ramon an' I come here tuh buy a outfit, figgerin' some way tuh make another try fer that loot. He got drunk, tried tuh buck Lucero's tiger, an' here we are."

"What about Jake an' me, Stormy?" scowled the kid. "All uh that ain't no reason why Jake should bar me from the Hatchet."

"Ain't huh?" Stormy twisted uneasily. "Don't think it ain't. It seems like Elfego was once with a Jaramillo herd raided by Curly Bill. Most uh the vaqueros was killed an' young Pancho Jaramillo captured an' held fer ransom. Elfego made three trips tuh Galeyville carryin' messages an' finally money. He fetched young Jaramillo back. But through it all, he got putry well acquainted with Curly Bill's gang an' other fellers in Galeyville. One of the gents he met was leadin' the bandits that trapped him the other night. Likely El Culebro hisself. Quien sabe?"

"Well," snapped Lobo. "Spit it out. Who was it?"

"Name uh Terrence Larrigan, kid!" he snapped.

"By God, no!" Lobo leaped up. "Terrence Larrigan's dead. You're lyin'!"

Stormy shook his head. "Don't hop me, kid. I'm tellin' yuh like it was told tuh me. Theys somethin' damn spooky

about that layout down yonder—somethin' Ramon won't talk about."

"Where the hell is that Spic?" demanded Lobo, irately. "C'mon, le's find him."

He whirled, darted toward Lucero's. Stormy reared up, cursed, leaped after him.

"Hold on, yuh locoed fool. What yuh aimin' tuh do?"

Before Lobo could answer a door creaked open. Hoarse whispers ran through the darkness ahead. Lobo and Stormy froze, hearkened. Something hit the ground, soddenly, like entrails loosed from a quartered beef. Footsteps. A door slammed. Silence.

Stormy cursed raspingly, darted forward. Lobo ran at his flank. Starlight fell on a shadowy blot in the lane dust. They knelt. It was Ramon Montoya, still in death, his throat marked with human fingers that had throttled his life.

VI

NEITHER man spoke as Stormy dug frantically through the young Mexican's clothes. Then the oldster was cursing, softly, fervently, his eyes locking Lobo's in the starlight.

"They've cleaned him!" he hissed. "They've lifted his map. An' killed him. Damn 'em, Lobo, I liked this boy. An' his killin' has give me two reasons fer layin' my sights acrost them skunks in yonder."

"It gives me one," snarled the kid from Galeyville. "An' it ain't got nothin' tuh do with Ramon or treasure. I gotta spike that lie about Terry Larrigan killin' Tommy Woodruff."

"Don't know how yo're goin' tuh do it, kid. How yuh goin' tuh find the place?"

"By follerin' the map," said Lobo, fiercely, and ran his fingers along Ramon's bruised throat. "Not too hard tuh guess who done this, Stormy."

"Who?"

"Brazos! Them fingers! Le's shove outa here or we'll be gettin' some of the same."

"I ain't getting out," snarled Stormy, hitching his holsters, empty like Lobo's since the mêlée. "I'm goin' in that dump an' take it apart."

"You'll git yore throat slit," rapped the youngster and made a leap at the enraged cow dog. "Its suicide. We're both gunless an' stiffer'n a pair uh froze chaps. Le's fog it, get ourselfs heeled an' come back."

"Turn loose uh me," grunted the oldster, wriggling, fighting Lobo's iron grip. "I'm drinkin' the blood uh that Brazos if it's the last thing I do. Cast off them paws, yuh simperin' idjit." His struggles were to no avail and at last he gave in, panting like a rock lizard. "Oh-h-h, all right. I cave. Le's plant Ramon decent. If things was turned around, I'd rather he laid me under the mesquite than in boothill. He'p me git him inter the willers an' I'll fetch the hawsses."

They carried the limp body into the willows and Lobo stayed with it while Stormy went to the saloon hitchrack for the animals—his and Ramon's. He had a gun, taken from Ramon's saddle and was fuming. Lobo watched him closely.

"A damn rotten shame," raged the oldster as they lashed the body across a saddle. "This kid's got a crippled mother down at Rancho Jaramillo. Waitin' fer men folks that'll never—"

"I met her," broke in Lobo, grimly. "Layin' out uh doors in her bed, her house burned an' everything lost. But happy that her boys is fetchin' back enough dinero tuh pay the sawbones tuh fix her laigs. It's plumb hell fer her, Stormy."

"Hell an' double it," Stormy spat. "Wisht they was somethin' we could do about it."

"There is," grunted Lobo, "if we kin figger it out. C'mon. Le's plant the Mex."

THEY chose to lead the horses past Lucero's, ominously quiet now, though lamps splashed ragged rectangles of light through cobwebby windows. Stormy's faded eyes fastened on those opaque panes with strange fascination. As if they drew him to exact payment for the boothill fingers of a stranger. They were passing the door with their inert burden when a hiss stabbed the darkness.

"Alli! It is they!"

The door flung open. Two of Lucero's nondescripts plunged out, knives glittering. Exactly as if he had expected it, Stormy dropped his rein, leaped to meet them. It all happened so swiftly that Lobo could

make no move to prevent him. Low curses were spewing from the old cow dog as he flashed into battle with swinging short gun.

One of the Lucero men cried out, sank under the impact of Stormy's clubbed gun. The other screamed a warning, closed with the hurtling oldster. A knife flashed, rang against a bludgeoning Colt's barrel. Then the door of the dump disgorged a rush of swart fighters who wove to the attack.

Stormy howled—and met them.

Lobo knew the danger of mixing in this second mêlée, knew it was not his fight. But when caution urged him to hop Stormy's horse and fog it, he thought of the old cow dog bled white with their knives and knew it was his fight. Out of that welter of battling men came Stormy's desperate appeal:

"Wet yore feet, kid. They've got me overmatched."

And Lobo did. He ripped into that scrap swinging a split-tail quirt that had hung on Ramon's saddle. They gave back before its lash, screaming oaths. Someone caught the lash and jerked the kid down. A half dozen men leaped upon him in a crush. Taken by surprise, crushed and powerless beneath a swarm of assailants, Lobo went limp, held his breath, bided his time.

It came when the pile commenced to lighten from lack of resistance. Wrenching himself loose with a savage jerk, the kid gained an opening, planted a rock-like fist in a grunting face. Over and over he rolled, making a desperate bid for freedom.

A man dove at him, misjudged, and missed. Lobo clubbed him at the base of the brain, stiffened him out. Then ripped back in bold attack, smashing desperately at menacing faces. A knife slit his sleeve, laying open his forearm. The pain fired him with battle lust. He clubbed a man down, knocked another spinning. Someone catapulted at his legs, upsetting him and once more they swarmed atop him, probing for a death thrust.

Lobo's legs flexed and he came up like a swimmer breaking water. Under his thin bloodied shirt his great chest heaved. His shoulder muscles bunched convulsively. A knife swung at him in a deadly disemboweling arc. Lobo slid the stroke, kicked the man in the groin, sending him writhing, screaming to earth.

Teeth locked, lips snarling, the kid uttered the fighting word, "cholos!" and took to them, careless of the odds. Amuck. Slugging, smashing, pounding, brushing aside their steel as though it were harmless. Swaying with feline ease, he pivoted, smashed down a pair darting in to heel him. He couldn't hear Stormy now and it shocked him to think the old cow dog was down, knifed to death. That thought spurred flagging forces.

Two of Lucero's men fastened like leaches to his thighs. A knife stabbed him high in the hip. Lobo's strong fingers fastened on one of those faces, forced it back . . . back. . . . He sneered, laughed into terror-drenched eyes swimming with an unvoiced prayer. Straining muscles gave. A sinister *crack* sounded and the kid hurled the limp lifeless figure from him. Veins bulging in his neck, Lobo lashed out for the other. But with screamed, *"Madre de Dios!"* the man darted into the night.

Still they came in. Like terriers worrying a great Dane. A knife sliced his ribs. Another bit into his shoulder. He caught one of the Bowie addicts, hurled him shrieking through the air. And then they had him down again. It looked like the end unless a miracle could happen. And it did. . . .

A SHRILL, authoritative order rifled the darkness. The door of the dump bulged and the riff-raff scuttled inside, dragging those who had fallen. In the rattle of a spur the spot was deserted save for two dazed, weary and battered men lying upon the ground. Lobo and Stormy. All lights were suddenly extinguished within Lucero's place. From somewhere came the beat of many hoofs.

Half fearfully, the cracked whisper of Stormy lifted. "Hey, Lobo! Did they git yuh, pard?"

"Not noticeable," came the grim reply. "You?"

"Sliced like sidemeat," grunted the oldster, "an' some chunks missin'. But dang pore fodder fer the boothill birds."

Salty old devil. Lobo chuckled, rose weakly and jabbed his shirt tail into his jeans. He felt himself over. Cuts and

bruises all over his body. Blood and sweat coursing his sides. He growled in his throat and reeled drunkenly. Sore but not satisfied. He jerked Stormy up. Both of them were all in but not seriously hurt by some strange quirk of Fate. The fighting flames of their anger still roared in their veins.

"How yuh stackin', Lobo?"

"Like a load uh hay full of pitchforks," grinned the kid. "I'll live over it if I never look the same. If I had my guns I'd poke in there an' put a bug on them kioaties. Who's this comin'? Look. . . ."

A cavalcade turned into the lane, raced toward them like ghosts in the starlight. At sight of two apparently drunken punchers clinging together, they curbed their mounts.

"You two fellers look happy," sang out one. "Hey, what the hell? Lucero closed up?"

"Closed . . . yeah," mumbled Lobo. "Closed up."

"Hard luck, fellers," called another. "An' on my birthday, too. I aimed tuh cut a big nick in the breed's bankroll this night, feelin' lucky like I do."

"That ain't luck, Red," laughed someone. "That's hard likker talkin'. C'mon."

Laughing, the puncher band wheeled their mounts, roared back into Rinconada. And, unless Lobo missed the sign, with them went the fear that had driven Lucero's pack from the kill. Realizing their deadly danger, the kid flung an arm about Stormy. Together they reeled across the lane, caught their grazing horses. In another moment they had mounted and were heading with their dead toward Stormy's camp in the *cienega*.

There where the cool green of cottonwood and willow is hidden by the mesa rim, Lobo and Stormy labored wearily, painfully. Digging a grave for Ramon last of the Montoya men. Resting on his shovel, Lobo stared down at the blue bruises at Ramon's throat, looming with ghastly clarity in the moonlight. A gnawing, impersonal grief drawfed the kid's physical pain and the mystery of life and of death was heavy upon him.

"Here's a feller," he told Stormy, "what never had his chance. A life is a steep price tuh pay fer pullin' a lamb's trick in a wolf's den. But from what his ma told me, he musta been a good kid an' I'm doin' what I kin tuh he'p her git what he wanted her tuh have. How about you, Stormy? And without waiting for the oldster to answer, he spoke directly to the dead: "Don't worry, kid. We can't give yuh much of a plantin', but we'll have a try at yore killer an' do what a couple uh punchers can fer yore ma."

Stormy grunted. "How yuh goin' tuh start, Lobo?" he asked skeptically. "If you'd let me gone in an' took to them polecats—"

"If I had," broke in the kid from Galeyville, "I'd uh been plantin' yuh both. Listen Rawhide. Yuh reckon Ramon would care if I wore his clothes?"

"Fer what?"

"Oh-h-h, jest a kind of a crazy idea uh mine."

Stormy snorted. "Shore sounds loco. But Ramon's so dead I don't see what kin he do about it."

"Git a blanket," snapped the kid, and fell to removing the Mexican's soiled clothing.

Now they lowered the blanket shrouded corpse into the hole, stared at it for a brief moment. No prayer, no eulogy, no tears. Just a silent tension edged with a grim determination to exact vengeance. They filled the grave, patted it down. Then staggered to Stormy's camp, shoulders sagging, eyes heavy with weariness. Lobo slumped to a blanket, muttering some hazy thing about, "gotta ketch up on my shuteye lost in a slaughterhouse party." Now Stormy dropped beside him. In a minute both were asleep, snoring.

VII

DAWN . . .noon . . . sunset. Lobo came alive, rolled to one elbow. Stormy lay beside him, mouth open, chest rising and falling sonorously. Moving silently, Lobo arrayed himself in Ramon's clothes. Sun-tanned, brown as a Mexican, he looked more like a caballero than the puncher of yesterday. Scribbling a note to Stormy, the kid caught Ramon's buckskin, eased out of camp and loped away for Rinconada. In his holster was Ramon's .45.

When Stormy awoke, night had fallen. The note read:

"Stormy: I'm huntin' snakes. Don't foller me or yuh'll make it a misdeal.

LOBO."

Sore and stiff in every muscle, the oldster chuckled as he filled the coffee pot and sliced bacon.

"A wolf huntin' snakes. Humph. An' worritin' that I'll stick my horn in. He kin rest his mind. I ain't nowise as ranicky as I was last night, same not bein' the first time whisky's made a damn fool uh me. Kinda hate tuh lose that Lobo kid though. Wonder where-at I'll find 'im if he don't come back?"

And as if the matter were too much for his tired brain, Stormy shrugged, turned to the important matter of getting supper.

IN town, Lobo had stabled the buckskin, had a bath and shave and a good meal at the Chink restaurant. He was feeling fit and bold when he took Coaly out of the barn and loped straight down to Lucero's. The hitchrack attested a considerable patronage and Lobo smiled coldly as he shoved in the door, eased down a dark corridor that led to the dingy barroom and its odors of stale smoke and liquor fumes.

From two points came the drone of faro dealers. In one corner a large group sweated a game of three-card monte. No one paid the slightest heed to Lobo who searched in vain for burly Brazos Barger. The kid edged to the bar, waggled a finger at a breed drink server. The man came forward, eying him suspiciously.

"Where's Brazos?" asked Lobo in Spanish.

The man spread his hands. *"Quien sabe?* Who can say where the wind comes from or where it goes, señor?"

"Wind?" Lobo laughed sneeringly. "Brazos a wind? No. Nothing more than a gentle breeze. And I'll tell you where he's blowing, pronto."

"O-ho!" cooed the man, lifting his brows. "The so-wise vaquero. Where will the wind blow Brazos?"

"Straight into hell, *pelado*. And when he blows, you duck for cover and play safe, savvy?"

The breed chuckled with nasty humor, his eyes seeking the monte crowd in the corner.

"Hell, you say? How can the wind blow Brazos into hell, amigo, when"—

"Astraddle of a .45 bullet!" said the kid softly. "Which ain't half as hard as you think. Where's Blas Lucero?"

"Who but *El Señor Dios* can know such things?" shrugged the bartender sullenly.

"Damn ignorant, ain't yuh?" Lobo's laughter held the bold contempt of a fearless man.

Lobo turned his back, took three swift steps and as suddenly wheeled. He caught the breed signaling. Following the man's stare, the kid saw a tiny panel close, in the wall behind the balcony rail. He laughed.

"Thanks for the tip, *pelado*. Now that he knows I'm here, I reckon that I'll go right up."

He strode toward the ladder-like staircase that gave to the narrow balcony. A silent something seemed to run through that room. Now the monte game was breaking up, the players backing to the wall, sliding along it. Scum of the border. Jackals of this worst of murder dives. Their black unfriendly eyes fixed on Lobo with satanic intensity.

THE air was suddenly oppressively hot, stifling. The silence was ominous and into its hush intruded the hiss of forced breathing. Intensely alive, thrilling to the danger, Lobo slid on his toes, his pale eyes flicking strangely. A gunman on the kill. But not a gunman by choice, driven by temperament or conceit. In him was a gnawing pain, a fire-seared picture of Señora Montoya, of Rancho Jaramillo as he had seen it last, of the singing gambler that had been his sire. In him was an uncontrollable urge to clear the name of Larrigan of a blood stain they were fouling it with. And this, the first step, was inescapable.

Now they edged along the wall to cut him off. His hand snapped to the ironwood butt of his Colt's. They stopped, watching him like cats. He had tasted their steel the night before and wanted no more of it. In their turn, they wanted none of his gunsmoke.

At the foot of the stairs, Lobo paused, let his eyes run the circle of their dark eager faces. They shrank back, swart hands loitering above faded sashes. And the kid, with scornful laugh, climbed the

steps, legs pumping stiffly, neck flat against his collar.

Snarlingly they watched him climb, making no move to stop him. Some even grinned, suspecting what this lone wolf would run into in the rooms giving onto the balcony. Before the door of the room of the observation panel, Lobo tensed, tried the door. Unlocked. He slipped the latch, kicked the door open, plunged in, his .45 level in his fingers.

A dim, red shaded bracket lamp burned on one wall, illuminating a large and sumptuously furnished room, seemingly empty. The air was heavy with the smoke of perfumed cigarets.

Lobo closed the door, locked it behind him, padded cautiously to the center of the room, gun ready, eyes stabbing the dark corners. From somewhere came faint movements. A soft shoe slithered and the air pulsed with repressed breathing. And suddenly Lobo could feel the weight of unfriendly eyes.

Now sounded the rustle of silk, the rattle of curtain rings on a metal rod. The kid's eyes snapped to the sound. In the rosy light, he saw the billowing of a curtain, saw a dark figure materialize. Blas Lucero, stood there, his face hazy behind the twining smoke of his cigaret, his yellow eyes spearing the kid, his lips curled in a malignant grin.

"Hola!" he greeted and a puzzled look flitted across his face. "I had expected others to come like coyotes to the trap. Who are you and what is it that you seek?"

"I'm the feller what keeps the undertaker busy," gruffed Lobo, and was secretly pleased that Ramon's clothes defied the breed's sharp eyes. "An' I'm lookin' fer Brazos."

"And findin' him?" Lucero's query was cruel as a dash of ice water.

"I'm takin' the map he stole from the Montoya kid he murdered," Lobo finished for him.

"Ah. A map. Talk on, señor. You interest me. What of this map?"

Something told the kid Lucero's ignorance wasn't feigned.

"A map telling where to find the Jaramillo treasurer, Lucero, drawn by a man who has seen it, had his fingers on it. Didn't think Brazos was smart enough tuh fool yuh thataway, did yuh? Where's he at?"

Lucero's suave smile hardened to a chill smirk.

"Brazos!" he snarled, half to himself. Then, "Who are you, that you know of these things?"

He reached up, jerked a cord. Behind the kid another curtain sang. A slender ribbon of yellow light lanced the rosy gloom, limning Lobo perfectly.

"Lobo Larrigan!"

With a soft curse, Lucero stabbed for his gun. And Lobo swung his own depressed muzzle, barking something about "Cast off that gun iron, yuh simperin' nigger. Palm it, an' you take the lead."

As the hated appellation stung his ears, the breed's eyes reflected death. His head, wide and flat at the ears, settled between narrow shoulders. His long-fingered hand flicked like a striking snake to his sash where slept a two-mouth derringer. Out it swept, and up, with the measured confidence of long practice. Patently ignoring the warning despite Lobo's drop. Was he crazy?

Lobo would have fired when the breed's gun flashed out, save for a strange and inexplainable thing. As Lucero leveled his weapon, he turned sharply, faced eyes and gun away from Lobo. The kid's eyes following the man's move, saw nothing at which he could be aiming.

WHAT happened then was swift, kaleidoscopic, bizarre. As Lobo flicked his eyes at Lucero's supposed target, he was conscious of several things simultaneously. First there seemed to be no one in the line of Lucero's fire. Second, the room was thundering to gun concussion and there was a sudden exquisite pain in the kid's chest muscles, along his ribs. Third, a swift glance betrayed Lucero still facing away, the smoke writhing up from his gun muzzle.

Knowing he had been tricked, Lobo staggered back. He was wounded, how badly only time would tell. He eared back the hammer of his gun and was conscious of the look of unholy amusement on Lucero's face. It came to Lobo all at once that he had been shot by some infernal carom shot and he dropped to the floor, snapping two swift shots at the breed.

Instead of dropping his man, there was a metallic tinkle of falling glass as a long mirror crashed and fell. And in the glitter of shattered glass, Lobo had his answer. He had seen, not Lucero, but his reflection. And in the dim light, the illusion had been perfect. Lobo had escaped death by a whisker.

Gathering himself, Lobo leaped at the swaying curtain, clutched its folds, jerked it down. Muffled by its folds, came the bark of the sash gun, the ball chunking into the wall. Then Lobo ended it—quick. With choppy blows of his gun sight, he clubbed the squirming curtain-entangled breed into unconsciousness.

Unrolling the limp man, Lobo went through his pockets, just in case. . . . But there was no map. Nor a ruby. Just coins, keys and a few meaningless papers. The balcony was now trembling under the boots of Lucero's cohorts. The door shuddered under the impact of heavy fists.

"Hold 'em, Blas," came the heavy treble of Brazos Barger. "We're comin' in tuh ear down that kioaty." And the door shivered with the thrust of his weight.

Lobo looked about him. Just behind where Lucero had stood was an open panel, screened normally by a sliding chest of drawers. The kid leaped into the dim passage behind it, pulled the panel almost shut. The door from the balcony went down with protesting hinges and Brazos plunged into the room. Behind him crowded the cantina hangers-on.

Now Brazos leaped to the side of Blas Lucero, waving the others back.

"Looks like he's kilt," he announced morosely. "An'—"

A faint whisper, strident, compelling, sounded within two feet of his ear.

"As you are, Brazos! Wag yore ear an' I'll drill yuh center. Send out them breeds an' back up tuh me."

Frozen with the suddenness of his fear, Brazos complied. And when the others had clumped down the stairs, suspicious, muttering, Lobo stepped out to jam his .45 in the strangler's short ribs.

VIII

"DROP yore gun!"

Brazos did . . . like it was hot. Lobo kicked it quickly across the room and the strangler eyed him curiously.

"Lobo Larrigan!" he gasped.

"In the flesh," grinned the kid coldly. "Turn around an' git in that hole."

"What's the idee?"

"Idea?" mocked Lobo, taking down the wall lamp. "You didn't expect me tuh take that hidin' last night an' like it, did yuh? You've had yore fun. Now I'm takin' mine."

Snake Lucero writhed on the floor. Lobo stooped, rapped him smartly across the temple, stiffened him out. Brazo's eyes narrowed as his imagination began to work.

"You'll die fer this," he whined.

"Get in there," snarled Lobo, and stabbed him with the gun. Brazos got. As who wouldn't?

Behind the secret panel, which Lobo closed and barred against pursuit, they found themselves in a narrow room between adobe walls. A room lined with steel and equipped for seige. A rack of guns hung at one end. Patently, Lucero lived in fear which might have saved him his present plight but for holding Lobo so cheaply.

One end of the room gave upon a caricole staircase down which Lobo prodded his prisoner. At the foot was a heavy plank door, barred on the inside. At Lobo's order, Brazos opened the portal, passed outside. Lobo doused the light, jammed his gun deep in the strangler's side.

"Walk easy, feller, straight for the hitch-rack. First sign uh trouble, you die. Come along peaceful or commit suicide. Take yore choice."

Brazos cursed softly, stumbled ahead. Along the side of the rambling adobe dump. They passed the corner, headed across the open ground. At the doorway a blot of figures, the soft buzz of voices. A challenge!

"Quien es?

"Answer him," snarled Lobo, and jammed his gun harder.

"It's Brazos," called the strangler, sullenly. "Lookin' fer my hawss."

"Who ees weeth you, Señor Brazos?" came the query, then: "Ay, diablo, eet ees heem. 'Ow those fellas got down here?"

Lobo stirred Brazos into a run. "Say nothin' an' scratch gravel, feller. If they's shootin', you'll be first tuh swaller lead."

Brazos winced, hurried to his horse.

Now they were in the saddle, Lobo firing back at crimson flashes from the doorway. It was then that Brazos reined away in vain attempt to lose his captor. Lobo gigged Coaly, roared alongside. The muzzle of the kid's gun rose, fell, smashing into the strangler's thick skull. He went out like a blind eye.

Lying low on the withers, Lobo held Brazos in the saddle with one hand, slung his gun with the other. His .45 spewed its waiting slugs and the hellions in the doorway scattered. Before they could climb their broncs, Lobo had vanished in the night, heading at full speed with an unconscious prisoner for Stormy's camp at the *cienega*.

Quite without warning, Brazos' horse folded up, crashed, hurling its unconscious rider in an unlovely arc. A slug had tunneled the horse lethally and it had run until dead on its hoofs. Lobo whirled Coaly, swung down. Brazos was squirming, moaning, the shock having roused him. The kid jerked him up, stirruped his foot. It took all he had to boost that heavy form, but he succeeded. Then Lobo leaped up behind, started the horse. Brazos snapped out of his brain fog, whirled on Lobo.

"Damn yore soul, leave me—"

Lobo slugged him again with a grim satisfaction and breezed into camp with an unconscious victim. Stormy, half asleep beside the fire, rose, heaved on fuel, helped lift the strangler down to the bed. Brazos groaned, opened his eyes.

"Lay where yuh are," warned Lobo. "Make a funny move an' I swear it'll be yore last."

But Brazos, endowed with brutish courage and certain he was worth more to them alive than dead, flashed a loose-lipped grin, came to his feet with fingers working. With an oath Stormy caught up a cottonwood club, leaped at the strangler with a scream of hate. He cracked the big man once, tipped him over and lit astride him. As the bludgeon came up and over for a stroke that must surely have brained Brazos, Lobo kicked it out of the oldster's hand, jerked him off.

"Listen, yuh dang badger. Lay offa him, he's mine. Kill him an' where-at are yuh? I've got important business with him, come daylight. Fetch a rope."

GRUMBLING, the oldster did as bidden. They trussed Brazos to a tree.

Then Lobo went to bed, but Stormy kept the fire going all through the night, gloating over the strangler's suffering. After breakfast in the morning, Lobo regarded Brazos with half-lidded speculation.

"Look this 'un over good, Stormy," he mused. "He's a snake. Not a rattler. No. He never gave nobody warning. He's a boa—a boa constrictor, savvy? Lookit his eyes. Snake eyes, sorta oval an' lidless. Beady an' close together. Little an' full uh murder."

"Rave on, wind-belly," sneered Brazos, straining at his ropes. "I'll tear out yore pipes with my fingers for this."

"Shut up," snarled Lobo. "As I was sayin', Stormy, lookit his muscles. Long an' ropey an' strong as steel. A boa's muscles are thataway an' they kin crush a man like breakin' aigs. Cut a snake in two an' yuh git blood cold as hung beef. I wonder what a feller'd find if he cut this 'un in two? God hep the man a big boa clamps onto. An' the same goes fer this Brazos. Go through his clothes."

Chuckling, the cow dog leaped to the task. Brazos glared at him, his eyes twin orbs of murderous fury. Wild with rage, the man hissed, spat at Stormy, tried to fang him. Exactly like an enraged snake. But, giving as good as was sent, Stormy made the search. A knife, some coins and odds and ends completed the tally. No map.

"Humph," scowled Lobo judiciously. "Where is it?"

"Go tuh hell!" snarled the strangler.

Lobo let his eyes stray from the ugly figure at the tree. He was bitterly disappointed in not finding that paper. Brazos had cached it. How best to make the man spill the hiding place? The kid's glance fell athwart Stormy's sawbuck pack saddles, stacked atop some low brush. The saddles seemed alive with big red ants, pouring out of their hill below. Lobo grinned.

"Cut him offa that tree," he barked, and when it was done, helped hog-tie the man, wrists to ankles at his back. Now Lobo heaved a lass rope over a long cottonwood limb, tied one end to Brazos' bonds. Lobo kicked the saddles aside. The two cow-

punchers heaved on the rope and Brazos hung, face down, right over the ant hill. With vindictive Stormy holding the weight about a bole, Lobo stirred up the ants. Brazos was grunting, cursing, threatening.

"Wait'll I git loose," he frothed. "I'll choke yuh til yore tongue hangs out a foot."

"Yeah," mocked Lobo. "Have a lot uh fun. Where's that map?"

"What map? I don't savvy what yo're talkin' about. An' you'll be sorry—"

"Let 'im down, Stormy."

STORMY paid out rope. Brazos plumped into the nest of fire-tailed insects. His spouting curses turned to a scream, then groans. In an instant he was alive with them, their steel-tipped, poison-edged mandibles scourging him. Lobo leaped to the rope. They hauled him up.

"Ready tuh talk?"

"Like hell!" bellowed the tortured man. "Tell yuh nothin'. Kill me. Feed me to the ants till they's nothin' but bones. I'll get yuh fer this if I have tuh track yuh through hell in a asbestos suit. An' kill yuh slow—by fire."

"Let 'im down again, Stormy."

And down he went. The insects were on his face, in his nostrils, stinging his eyes. He grunted his pain, not daring to open his mouth. A ghastly moan broke his clenched teeth. He stiffened, his eyes rolling horribly. They swung him up. The low voice of the kid from Galeyville. . . .

"Where's the map, Ant-bait?"

"Damn yuh! Let 'em chaw me up!"

"All right," commented Lobo, grimly. "Yo're such a hawg fer punishment, we'll let 'em finish yuh."

And for the third time they let him down. Inside, Lobo was a seething anger, a biting disappointment. Brazos had ceased to struggle. Just lay there with heaving chest and closed eyes. Waiting for the seeping poison to club him insensible, resigned apparently to death. The kid squirmed uneasily. He had no qualms about Brazos, but he knew that the man's death would forever end any hope he might have of vindication. He tightened his hold on the rope.

"Aw, leave him stay there," grinned Stormy. "I ain't had so much fun since who laid the chunk. Leave the ants eat the rat up."

A shrill scream from the suffering strangler seemed to answer him. Not a scream of pain, but one of stark deadly fear. Stormy was pointing, shouting. "He's flushed a sidewinder!"

Lobo's eyes bugged. Sure enough, disturbed perhaps by the irate ants, a tiny horned rattler had edged from its covert, struck at the working face of the strangler, missed and hooked its fangs in the man's shirt. They yanked Brazos up, his screams rifling, his eyes horrible wells of inborn fear. Such a fear as a constrictor snake has for those of a venomous nature. Brazos had forgotten his pain.

"Git it offa me!" he bawled. "Take the dang thing off. If he fangs me, I'm gone. I've seen 'em die thataway. Awful! Git 'im off before he fangs me in the neck."

"Shore," snapped the kid. "When yuh tell where you've hid Montoya's map."

"I'll tell. Git this fanger off an' I'll tell yuh."

"Not a chance, stranglin' man. Stormy, lower the rat tuh where the snake kin git a good strike at his throat."

"Cripes, no!" bleated the killer. "I didn't kill the young Mex. One uh the breeds done it. The map's in a termater can in the first manger uh the Border Stables. Git 'im offa me. Git 'im off!"

"If I was a Injun, Brazos," barked Lobo, "I'd leave the snake have yuh fer that lie about Ramon. Hold 'em, Stormy, while I swing him clear."

Lobo removed and killed the singing sidewinder, swung Brazos clear of the ants as Stormy lowered away.

"Hop yore fuzz an' light a shuck, Stormy," advised the kid. "Look fer that map. If he's told the truth, fine an' dandy. If not, come back here an' we'll feed him to a real rattler—a diamondback. Pay the stableman while yo're in town an' fetch back Ramon's buckskin."

FOR an hour Lobo picked ants, listening with bored inattention to Brazos' unspeakably filthy abuse. Then Stormy's yell broke the monotony. The oldster came loping into the *cienega* waving a paper. It was the map. Lobo rose, laughing. It seemed the weight of years had been taken off his shoulders. That paper meant, not

the opportunity for wealth and blood-stained treasure, not the adventure of entering the lair of heartless bandits, but the revelation of a shining road leading to vindication of his name, to proof that a Larrigan didn't kill Tommy Woodruff.

Stormy was jubilant as he pressed the soiled paper into Lobo's hand.

"Shore it's the right one, Stormy?"

"I'll tell a man. Ramon showed it tuh me plenty times. You bet it's real. An' me, I'm rearin' tuh make a try fer that Potrero Infierno before them bandits split up the loot. Le's put a rope around the stranger's neck an' h'ist 'im."

"Nope." Lobo shook his head, bent to the task of unroping Brazos. "He's mine, an' I'm turnin' him loose." He turned to the prisoner, face blue and swollen with ant venom. "It's a long walk tuh where you kin fork a hawss, feller. So you best tuh stir a dust. An' fer yore own good don't go near Lucero. He's a mite peeved about you holdin' out the map on him."

Brazos leered through swollen lids.

"I'm goin'," he growled, flexing his stiffened limbs. "You win this hand but they's another deal a-comin'. Next time we meet, yuh better shoot or run faster'n Brazos Barger if yuh hone tuh live. I aim tuh kill yuh both."

Stormy caught up his rifle, leveled it. He was convulsed with hate of this boa-like creature, enraged that Lobo was loosing him.

"Move!" he barked. "Start walkin'. If yo're within' range in five minutes, I'll burn yuh down."

Stiffly, painfully, the strangler trudged away. Side by side, Lobo and Stormy watched him climb to the mesa rim and vanish. Then, excited as two kids, they spread out the map of Elfego Montoya to plan a trip frought with peril.

A WORD to the wise is sufficient. And Brazos was wise, in his way. Knowing the fate meted out to those crossing the will of Blas Lucero, he avoided the man and all his cohorts. At the Border Stables, he took out a horse, staring ruefully at an empty tomato can in the first stall.

Taking a seldom used route out of Rinconada, Brazos hit the mesa, stirred his mount into a long lope westward. That evening he entered Galeyville, just awakening like some blinking nocturnal creature. It was an hour before he could closet himself with the ones he sought and tell them a vague disconnected yarn of gold coin, rubies and Mexican bandits that he himself only half sensed. And now, his eyes pleading, he waited for Curly Bill to speak.

"Map, eh?" the border raider sneered nastily. "An' buried treasure. Heifer dust! You been hittin' the marijuana pipe, feller. Where's this map now?"

"They stole it offa me," protested Brazos, meekly. "Do these ant bites look like marijuana? They put me on a ant hill an' tortured me till I squealed. Then they took my map. It's like I tell yuh. They's hundred's uh thousands uh dollars down there fer the takin' if we beat them two pirates."

"It don't look interestin' tuh me, Barger," decided Curly Bill. "If yo're tellin' the truth an' the money's down there, the takin' of it's loco an' dangerous. Nope, don't look at me. I'll get mine off'n the smugglers."

Brazos slumped, looked whipped. From the corner came the slow drawl of taciturn John Ringo.

"Who'd you say these hombres are that's got the map?"

"Old feller name uh Stormy an' a kid callin' hisself Lobo. Lobo Larrigan."

Curly Bill snorted. "I'd like tuh go just tuh put a hum in a Larrigan like I done once before."

Ringo sat up, abruptly. He laughed softly and came to his feet.

"Don't bother yourself, Curly," he drawled. "Seat for a gambler and I'm taking chips to gamble on a treasure. No need us both going. I'll take nine men besides Brazos." He turned to the strangler. "Sure you can find this Potrero Infierno?"

"I studied that map till I kin go there in my sleep."

"Good!" snapped John Ringo. "Let's get started."

"Yuh got a long chore uh saddle whackin' fer nothin'," taunted Curly Bill. "Any message you'd like me fer tuh send yore folks, kids an' such?"

"Yes," smiled the splendidly formed six-foot-three specimen with the sad eyes. "Tell them John Ringo was one rascal who never

broke his given word, that he never forgot a friend and that he went into a place that stopped Curly Bill."

He pushed out of the room, followed by Brazos. When the door had closed behind them, the roistering raider with the thick body and the great shock of black curly hair looked after them, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Allus talkin' in riddles, the dang book-rat," he muttered, half angrily. "Now I wonder just what he meant by that."

It took less than an hour for Ringo to select nine human wolves from the pack that followed Curly Bill. At his order they rose to their saddles, followed him and Brazos Barger southeastward toward the great bend of the border. Holding a long mile-eating lope that carried them swiftly toward Hell's Pasture, on the east rise of the Sierra.

IX

OFFICERS of the Rurales, Mexico's admirable mounted police, agree that of all the difficult assignments of a difficult patrol, Potrero Infierno is the worst. Hell's Pasture is literally that and double it. A tortured maze of ash and lava badlands, its tortuous labyrinths might have been expressly created as a perfect haven for the lawless.

A place of evil purpose, shunned by the Mexicans, feared by the Yaquis, who found in its blind trails, mysterious night fires, its hot earth, steaming springs and hammer-like sun, a worthy abode for *El Señor Diablo,* Lord of Hell.

Into this wasteland rode Lobo Larrigan and Stormy Sanders, slowly, carefully, hands frozen to the butts of their guns. Feeling their way through the darkness, in accord with the directions on Elfego Montoya's penciled map.

Up Valle Ascencion to Dos Hermanos, the twin buttes that rose like frowning giants from the plain. Between those lowering landmarks and into a narrow barranca, where the hoof-beaten trail threaded upflung masses of twisted lava, looming like pain-distorted creatures in the starlight. Between straight black walls that gave off a strange phosphorescence and that reflected heat from the bowels of the earth, rather than from the sun. Crossing a murmuring stream of water so hot it caused their ponies to dance.

Now the trail pitched up, passed through a narrow pass. There tall columns reared skyward like steeples from their basalt bases. For the past few miles, Lobo had been tormented by the feeling that they were followed. Yet never had he detected so much as a movement or suggestion of threat to the rear. So strong had the feeling become when they reached the low pass, he called a halt.

"Now what?" gruffed Stormy.

"I gotta feelin' that somebody's tailin' us," replied the kid.

"Me an' you both," exploded the oldster. "I've been thataway fer a hour. The place is spooky. Yuh reckon we kin see anything from yon dome?'

"We kin try," said he kid, and slid off his horse. He thumbnailed a match, looked at the trail.

"Lose somethin'?" queried Stormy.

"No rubies," chuckled Lobo, "nor any uh the cattle what's been drove up here right recent. C'mon."

Leaving their mounts ground tied, they climbed a round eminence, paused panting at the top. The moon had half risen over the ragged horizon and the two punchers looked back across the tumbled terrain they had traversed. Nothing moved. But wait. . . . Way back yonder, a shadow seemed to pass over a moon-bathed opening. Another. Others. Like ants crawling across the stonelike face of a corpse. Stormy looked at Lobo.

"Spics," he gruffed. "On our tails an' comin' fast. Pinchin' us in, kid. Gettin' ready fer the big razzle-dazzle. Looks like I saw blood on the moon. What yuh reckon we better do?"

"Run!" snapped the kid from Galeyville. "Get inside Potrero Infierno before they ketch us. Get goin'!"

THEY leaped down the slant, found their horses and straddled. Stirrup to stirrup they flashed into a widening vale, studded with lordly domes, turrets, arches and battlements. Like entering some dead medieval city where only the dead walked, where the wind moaned sinister dirges through passage and crevice.

Now fantastic formations edged down to cramp the trail. And from one such,

depending from a gnarled and stunted juniper, hung a devilish burden, limned with terrible clarity by the revealing rays of the full moon.

The two invaders reined, cursing softly. Three corpses swayed in the warm breeze that whined dolefully. Three corpses hung by the feet as ghastly warnings to intruders in this eerie spot. Stormy sat his horse, rooted to the spot, goose-pimples breaking out along his spine. Lobo, unmoved by death, gigged his pony ahead, thumbed another match. He came spurring rapidly back.

"Rotten!" he hissed. "Rotten. We're gettin' close, rawhide. Yuh mind where the map says *palo solo y ojo caliente?* Lone tree an' hot spring. Well, that's her yonder. Accordin' to the map it's about a quarter to a stone barn fer hawsses. There'll be a guard tuh reckon with there. We better rein outa the trail up ahead. You'll stay with the bronc while I scout the lay."

"You ain't goin' alone," rapped the oldster stoutly. "I'm—"

"Stayin' with the ponies," reiterated Lobo. "If we're set afoot in this hell, it's boothill, shore as a .45."

"All right, dang yuh," grumbled Stormy. "You win. Who—whose bodies swingin' yonder?"

"The Montoyas," said Lobo savagely. "Elfego an' his two oldest boys. But Tommy ain't hangin' there, feller. Mebby he ain't dead, eh?"

"Acordin' tuh Ramon, he is," argued Stormy. *"Quién sabe?"*

Lobo grunted and they rode on. "Here we are," he said at length, and reined off the trail. He swung down behind a screening rock formation, loosened cinch, removed chaps and spurs.

"Stay with 'em, Stormy," he ordered seriously. "An' muzzle 'em with a tail hair so they won't nicker. An' don't leave 'em unless I holler. An' then come a'shootin' when you do, cause I'll need yuh plumb bad."

"You'll git kilt, prognosticatin' yonderly lone hand."

"Betcha two bits I don't, yuh ol' gloombelly."

"Take yuh, yuh buzz-tailed hyeenie."

They shook hands and Lobo was gone in the night, like magic.

HUGGING the shadows, Lobo slid furtively through the night, searching for some hint of bandit headquarters. He was almost against the rock building, called "barn for horses" on the map, before he recognized it, so closely did it resemble the rock shapes that surrounded it. Frightened by his blundering, the kid halted, listened. Now he crept forward again and was almost blinded by the glare of a suddenly scratched match.

First outpost. . . .

Lobo froze. Back against the barn not ten feet away, stood a guard lighting a cigaret. How the man had failed to detect his presence, Lobo couldn't understand. For seconds that seemed endless, the kid from Galeyville stood there watching the ebb and glow of the guard's cigaret, knowing that sooner or later the man would see him there.

Very slowly, carefully, Lobo stooped, picked up a pebble, thumbed it beyond the unwary fellow. When it lit clattering, the guard flipped away his smoke, caught up his rifle and stalked the noise, his spurs clanking. And the kid flitted like a shadow to the corner of the building.

After a fruitless search for whatever had alarmed him, the guard resumed his original position, just around the corner from where Lobo tensed. He was muttering to himself when the long barrel of Lobo's gun crashed heavily into his skull. Without a murmur, the bandit folded up, chinned the dirt. But as he fell, his long shanked spurs jangled through the silence. From not far away came a low hail.

"Hola, Pablo! Que tal?"

Lobo muffled his voice. *"Ven, amigo,"* he called in Spanish, a note of alarm in his tone. *"Pronto!"* And substituted the cone hat of the senseless man for his own.

The unsuspecting guard came on the run, rifle ready, eyes stabbing the gloom. Spotting Lobo, he paused within arm's length.

"What, Pablo? What did you see?"

Lobo pointed to the shadowy shape of the fallen guard.

"There, see it?" And when the fellow bent over, peering, Lobo slugged him, dropping him like a gunned beef.

"Two," he chuckled icily, "that don't want no part in the evenin's festivities."

Gun palmed, Lobo listened intently, then

edged like a shadow into the gloom from which this guard had come. A trail materialized under the kid's feet, and this he left, preferring the rougher and less traveled gloom at the toe of the cliff. From a nest of black basalt upthrusts, he peered about a corner, gasped.

Below him, mellow in the pale moon glow, lay Hell's Pasture. A tumbled maze of weird shapes, ragged ridges, sandy washes. In the foreground, its surface reflecting the moonrays like burnished silver, lay a tiny lake, a steamy vapor lifting from its soft breast. And stretching back from the water for varying distances was a flat ash deposit that had patently once been lake bed, now a sub-irrigated pasture lush with salt grass. Cattle, hundreds of cattle, grazed across that expanse of flat or moaned contentedly as they lay and chewed their cuds.

A hundred yards away, in a whispering *alamosa,* Lobo espied the houses of the bandits betrayed by tiny glints of light seeping from beneath drawn window covers. And beyond, a long fenced corral where a hundred stolen horses drowsed. This then was the rendezvous of El Culebro, the Snake.

LOBO appraised the place, measuring its weaknesses, its strength. How best to approach it and what to do once there. Thudding hoofs warned him. He whirled, shrank back into the shadows, his eyes stabbing the back trail. A cavalcade of eight swung into view, halted in the bright moonlight, three of them blindfolded, five masked. A man was talking in a bold, arrogant voice.

"Wait here, Señor Woodruff, you and your men. Try no treachery, no violence, or you will die suddenly. Make no effort to remove your blinds for he who sees this spot will be buried here. Take the word of El Culebro for that. In five minutes our little transaction will be completed—and you will be gone from here."

He wheeled his fine horse, loped toward the bandit settlement. And Lobo watched him with mixed reactions. Woodruff! What Woodruff? Could that be Tommy down there and if so why the blindfold? Lobo didn't like the way the Snake had said "you will be gone from here." It had a sinister threatening sound. And something in its cynical throaty breathiness was familiar. Lobo pondered. Where had he heard that voice before?

Ornate in dark clothes and fine leathers, the Snake rode through the moonlight, head high, back straight, his features masked with black silk. At the largest of the several buildings, the man swung down, trailed his rein and strode to the door. Before it gave to his hand, his high, throaty screech lifted, shattering the silence:

"Larrigan! Do it now, Larrigan!"

That name stabbed Lobo like a keen blade. And for a moment he froze with the swift horror of impending doom. Then cursing with sudden intelligence of the bandit leader's meaning, he whirled, his eyes probing that waiting cavalcade in the trail. A half-voiced cry dribbled across his lips as his hand shot to his gun.

The masked riders of El Culebro were lifting theier short carbines, lifting them silently, covertly, all unbeknownst to their three blindfolded men they guarded. As the icy savagery of the Snake's murderous design flooded Lobo, he jerked his Colt's and rolled hot lead from his hip. Simultaneously, crimson flame spat from the shadows where Stormy waited with the horses. And then, strangely, miraculously, the three men were clawing at their blinds and the riders of the Snake were all out of the picture.

With the thunder of guns, one of the bandits clutched at his chest, stiffened and plunged from the saddle. Another crashed, along with his stricken horse, was caught beneath the plunging animal and fatally crushed. Two folded over their horns and were whirled away by frightened mounts. The fifth one reeled, caught himself, hit dirt and vanished in the darkness.

Somehow Lobo felt he should be elated. But wasn't. His face was convulsed and he sobbed with bitterness that his perilous hunt for vindication had ended thus. Jake Woodruff had been right. That shrieked name, "Larrigan," could only mean that one of that murderous five was Terry Larrigan, the kid's sire. Who else? He dared not go down there to verify what reason told him was a certainty. Someway Terrence Larrigan had been spared death and had cast his lot with Mexican bandits, only to die mayhap from a slug hurled by his own son.

A terrible soul-searing despondency took hold of the kid from Galeyville, changed the milk of his natural kindness to the curd of Cain-lust and the whey of murder.

"God!" he sobbed. "What's left but tuh take that damn Snake along."

The hoarse quality of his voice, uncannily loud in the stillness succeeding gunfire, shocked him into momentary inaction, unable to think clearly. A lot of things happened then. From somewhere came the shrill, cracked voice of Stormy Sanders:

"Hey you, Jake Woodruff! Ketch yuh up them Snake gun irons an' git organized down thisaway."

And the cowman's glad rejoinder: "Comin', Stormy, yuh ol' stink lizard. An' rearin' tuh fight the lousy sons uh polecats!"

And from the bandit cabins, drawn by gunfire and the authoritative exhortations of El Culebro, poured a tide of berserk killers, inflamed with marijuana and days of poisoning on cheap mescal.

X

WITH a strange detachment, Lobo watched the moves of that game of Cain from his vantage off the main trail. He saw the little group rally around Stormy and fort up in a nest of lava. Jake Woodruff and his men! That was a facer for Lobo. What was the Hatchet boss doing in the lair of the Snake? The thing was sure mixed up.

Yonder they came, the bandits. Roaring up the trail with the moonlight glinting off their rifles. A gun snarled. Another. The battle of Hell's Pasture was under way and two things gripped Lobo's mind in that mad moment. With the bandits aroused and in force, no one of the invaders would come out of the mess alive. That gave full play to Lobo's fatalism. But, more important, El Culebro wasn't leading his men. That last thought roused the kid.

With only a single objective now, Lobo leaped from his vantage, darted toward the bandit huts, hugging the shadows and screened from the racing renegades by friendly lava formations. Get the Snake. As he ran, he punched out the burned caps, reloaded. If he could only live to heel-tromp that thin-voiced bandit leader, rub out the heartless viper who had desolated Rancho Jaramillo and four times bereaved that sad-faced cripple who waited patiently for the return of husband and sons who had gone to join the ghost ranks of Potrero Infierno.

El Culebro's voice was stilled now and Lobo headed like an avenging Nemesis for the large cabin he had entered. For the bat of an eye winker, the kid paused before the doorway, beneath which streamed a ray of light. The night was ugly with the crash of guns, the harsh cries of men, the mêlée of tangling echoes. Inside the house was the low drone of voices. Gun in hand, Lobo put his shoulder to the panel, lunged into a long lighted room. His lips were drawn back snarlingly, his eyes swept the room for the flash of a black mask.

It's hard to say which was the most surprised, the group of five in the room, or Lobo himself. Two young, heavily armed and rather elegantly dressed Mexicans lounged before a low fire, painted women in their arms. Striding before them, his arms jerking as he talked, his face working convulsively, paced El Culebro, the Snake of Chihuahua.

A flood of strange sensations swept the kid as he skidded to a halt. First glimpse of the bandit leader, unmasked now, took him back to that night of tricky targets, in Blas Lucero's dump in Rinconada. El Culebro and Blas Lucero. One and the same. Sleek head, narrow sloping shoulders, skinny body undulating like a snake.

A snarl boiled over Lobo's lips as the two lieutenants of the Snake leaped up, shoved their women aside and struck for their side arms. That snarl changed to a wail as the Snake's dark face blanched and he ground out something about, "Larrigan, you meddling devil," and wriggled, rather than ran for the door of an adjoining room.

"Fight, you lousy snake," lifted Lobo's plea, "or I'll drill yuh in the back!"

But Fate ordained he shouldn't scotch the Snake that way. Screaming, one of the women raced across the line of fire and Lobo couldn't chance hitting her, no matter what she was or how hard his hate of Lucero drove him. Now the two Mexicans were triggering. A gun jarred the lights. A bullet brushed the kid as he

swung his muzzle in a blazing arc. A mad fussillade. A man lurching, dropping. The steady drum of lead in the wall. The second Mex down. And Lobo, unharmed, leaping like a panther for the door through which El Culebro had vanished. Snapping his hammer on empty shells.

INSANE with fear, one of the women flung herself like a tiger at Lobo, clutched him with desperate fingers. He brushed her aside, strode toward his objective. A rush of silk behind him. The keen deadly pain of a slender dirk between his shoulders. Sick for a brief moment, Lobo halted, flung questing fingers up his back, jerked loose the little weapon. Then, bawling like a stricken bull, he lurched at the cowering woman, heaved her up, rushed her to the door, hurled her outside.

Afire with pain, Lobo stumbled to the door that had swallowed the Snake, stuffing reloads into his gun. Now he stood in the half-opened portal, his hammer eared back like a snarling cat. In the darkened room a gun barked. Through the portal screamed a bullet that passed between Lobo's arm and body. Two inches to the left and it would have tunneled his heart.

Into that black void of danger, Lobo plunged recklessly. He had ceased to care what happened to him. Nothing mattered now but to kill the Snake. A door banged ahead of him and Lobo plunged through it in hot pursuit. Then ensued a grim race, through dark rooms and rooms lighted, through dark halls and long corridors. El Culebro scrambling wildly to shake off the berserk hombre that tailed him. Lobo never quite able to match the sinuous glide of snake-like Lucero.

Now the main *sala* echoed to shots and the hoarse howls of angered men. And toward that confusion the Snake headed. The man plunged into the smoke-filled room, his thin, throaty yelp lifting. Lobo ripped in after him and found the man fairly hemmed by his cohorts—sweating, bandaleroed men who gave no heed to their leader's *"Matale, matale!* Kill him!" but fired from window and door at roaring horsemen, pouring like a tide into Potrero Infierno.

Blas Lucero's gun was leveled, mouthing red as Lobo darted into the light. But the kid's hand swung, jutted, recoiled. His .45 spewed flaming lead the instant its blunt nose lined the shaken breed. Lucero doubled, jerked with the shock of Lobo's lead. A deadly bluish pallor took hold of his face. His eyes reflected terror of the death he had so coldly meted out to others. Now his knees sagged and his pistol dribbled from weakening fingers. He swayed, hissing, then plunged to the floor, his screamed, *"Dios!"* drowned in the crash of guns, in the strident bellow of some man outside.

"Poison for coyotes, men! Here's where we fatten our greaser tally!"

Lobo jumped. That was the battle cry of big John Ringo, an embittered Cain song in which he found one of the few pleasures of a broken life. To the kid from Galeyville, the sound of that voice made him wonder if it wasn't all a dream. A mad dream fraught with the rattle of guns, pound of hoofs, shouts, screams, curses. Maybe a dream, but if so—Lobo grinned fiendishly at the writhing Snake—a satisfying one. But one of the Snake's men jarred Lobo loose from that dream notion.

Swinging away from his port hole to reload his rifle, the man espied Lobo standing there, smoking pistol in hand. Espied also El Culebro on the floor. His shrill yell of warning preceded by a split second his stab for a short iron. The kid smashed him down with lead. At the man's shrill yell, another swung from his trigger bending, arched his rifle. Lobo shot coldly, with a laugh on his lips. Now they all were aware of the threat of him.

Lobo felt something run along his ribs. He staggered back a pace, dropped to one knee with sudden weakness. Kneeling there, spasms of laughter racking him, he fed them lead till his gun clicked empty. But two more were down and they had plenty of this *loco malo hombre* who had taken them in the rear. Screaming prayers to the Virgin for aid, they bolted, awed and fearful, fought like beasts to clear the portal and race into the struggle out of doors.

RUNNING from the blood-mad gringo who had killed their leader. Running from a kid who took to them with an empty gun, smashing a wicked path as he felled them to right and left with relent-

lessly flailing gun muzzle. Now it was over and Lobo had slammed the door shut. The smoke dimmed room was empty save for dead and dying. The kid dropped beside Blas Lucero, groaning and writhing like a broken-backed rattler. As the bandit chieftain's dazed eyes fell upon his enemy of Rinconada, he hissed, shot his hand to the knife sheathed at his sash.

"Lay quiet, Lucero," snarled Lobo. "I've got yuh right where yuh belong. Make a ranicky move and I'll kill yuh fer the snake yuh are. You're going tuh talk now, or know some hell."

The breed retched a laugh. "The joke's on you, Larrigan. I'm dying. Knowing all the hell right now that there is. Listen, there's whiskey in the cupboard. Fetch a man a last drink, eh?"

Peering through the smoke, Lobo located the cupboard, brought back the liquor. A stiff drink might bolster the dying man, loosen his tongue. Then too, the kid felt the need of a long drink. His side tingled and burned. The knife wound in his back throbbed horribly. He was weak, shaky from loss of blood.

He held Lucero's head while the man drank. When the liquor boiled up and the breed groaned, Lobo let him down. For moments he was sick—terribly sick with lead poisoning.

"The pain," he moaned, and the yellow eyes that had so often flashed murderous lust were glazing and shadowy with approaching death. "It's awful, Larrigan. You shot me . . . killed me. You think you win." He gritted a tight laugh, "But I'm even with you when you try to lift the treasure of the Jaramillos."

"I'm not liftin' treasure," snapped Lobo, testily. "I busted in here tuh make you talk, if I had tuh choke it outa yore skinny neck, Mister Culebro."

"Talk?"

"Yes, talk. Who killed Tommy Woodruff?"

Lucero's eyes batted and his thick, purpling lips screwed in a scornful smile.

"What a fool you are, Larrigan. Daring death to learn what you fear to hear." The breed tried to laugh but only a croak came forth. Deadly silence was succeeding the hell of gun war. Fighting outside had receded and dwindled to desultory shots. In the exaggerated hush it seemed to Lobo he coud hear the scaly glide of unseen reptiles, the soft purring of buzztails. He shuddered. The place was spooky.

"Who killed Tommy Woodruff?" he asked again, and in his heart was an awful fear.

"Your renegade father killed him," snarled the breed, joyfully. "Terry Larrigan! He's a killer, a thief, a rustler. He's lower than a sheep-killing dog. He's —El Culebro."

"You lie!" Lobo bent low to glare into pain-filled mocking eyes.

"Dying talk is true talk," grimaced the breed, and made an ineffectual attempt to cross himself. A last flare of killing rage gripped him. "Damn you, Larrigan, you ruined my game just as I was about to clean up. You've crossed me and, like all those others who fought my will, you'll die —die slow and in pain. I'm gone, but remember; the venom in the fang lives after the snake is dead."

The effort seemed to sap him. He paused, panting. Far from angering Lobo, the man's words had furnished a modicum of comfort in the contradiction that Terry Larrigan was El Culebro. Now Lucero's lips were moving and Lobo bent down to catch his last weak whisper.

"Hasta la momenta!" the dying breed smiled. "Until the moment you reach out for the treasure of the Jaramillos. Pain—and slow—death to you—meddler."

He essayed a laugh but the rattle of death shook in his throat. Blas Lucero was dead with hate emblazoned in his wide staring eyes, with mockery twisting his lips like a curse. And Lobo sat there beside him, sobbing with a bitter, dry-eyed disappointment. . . .

"Oh, God!" he groaned, weak from wounds and emotion. "Not that. Not that. It can't be . . .!"

XI

AT the very height of gunplay in the Battle of Hell's Pasture, a shadow slipped to the rear of El Culebro's rambling headquarters, darted across a moonlit open and paused for an instant at the rear door. It was a man, or the shell of what had once been a man.

His frame, once bulging with ropey muscles, was now so stooped and shrunken that

the ornate Mex clothes he wore hung on him grotesquely. His face, once ruddy, round and smiling, was gray and pinched. The eyes, that once sparkled with Irish wit and humor or glittered in equally Irish anger, were dull, lifeless, heavy with the bitterness of slavery.

Truly, this pitiful figure that hearkened furtively to sounds of conflict, bore little or no resemblance to the Terrence Larrigan that Galeyville knew. Yet it was he, broken and but a ghost of the man who had galloped from Galeyville a year before with Curly Bill's lead in his vitals. His body, wasted by an improperly treated wound, by beatings that had striped his back with scars, by scanty and improper food, trembled with weakness and from the fresh chest wound that dyed his shirt front crimson. His brain, tottering on the verge of madness from a year of unspeakable abuse, from the shock of numbing drugs they had plied him with, struggled with his pain, with the gun battle raging suddenly in Hell's Pasture. Wondering . . .

Now every breath an agony, he slid into a dark corridor, padded noiselessly along it and into a room where a stray moonbeam fell upon a littered table. From a drawer he took a key, let himself into an adjoining windowless room. Softly the panel closed behind him. From somewhere in the stygian gloom came the rasp of breath.

"Tommy, me bye," called Larrigan, guardedly.

"Here," came a cracked whisper. "What's all the racket?"

"War, Tommy. Faith an' some wild spalpeens have attacked this hell nest. But 'tis doubtin' I am that they can win. 'Tis our chance, me bye . . . hist!"

Key in hand, he crept forward. Metal scraped. Tumblers fell. A chain clanked eerily.

"Ther-r-re ye ar-r-re, Tommy bye. Can ye be aftther standin' on yer pins, me bucko?"

His head swathed in a blood-stained bandage, Tommy Woodruff tried his wobbly limbs, fell back, then rose clinging to the wall.

"Kinda shaky," he quavered. "I could do better with a thick steak under my belt. Dad didn't get in with the ransom, eh?"

Terrence Larrigan coughed. "Shur-r-re, an' he did, Tommy. And the murtherin' sar-r-rpent ordered me to kill him. Thanks to thim that's warr-r-rin' out yonder, he was saved, my bye. Mesilf, I shot two av the divils and the rest fell to yon fighters."

"The boys from the Hatchet?" cried Tommy, delightedly. "Followed Dad in tuh pay the ransom in lead. Listen!"

In an adjoining room men were fighting. Rifled curses—crash of guns—smash of lead against the walls—groans of wounded men. Then a silence into which intruded low mutterings.

"Come," whispered Terrence Larrigan. " 'Tis leavin' this place we should be afther thinkin' about. I fear the Snake has won again and if we escape we must . . ."

He found Tommy's hand and together they crept along the wall to the door. They paused at the portal, listening. Sudden emotion overcame Tommy in this close approach to freedom.

"Wait till I tell Dad what you've done for me, Mr. Larrigan," he said fiercely. "He will think all the more of you and that boy of yours. Lobo's been with us over a year . . . like one uh the family. I cussed him out before I got into this mess. But he was right. I'm sorry."

"Faith, me lad," comforted the Irishman. "Loife is just wan mistake afther anither. Each wan bein' a lesson to broaden us. Hist . . .!"

From the adjoining room, so recent embattled, lifted the anguished cry of a man tortured by a terrible emotion. . . .

"Oh God! Not that. Not that! It can't be . . .!"

"Say," gasped Tommy Woodruff, "if that ain't Lobo's voice, I'm a ringtailed jackrabbit. Shot mebby an' prayin' not tuh die. What the hell?"

"Lobo? Here?" Terrence Larrigan's voice came thickly, puzzled, like a child mulling over some interesting thought. "My boy" Then as his sick brain enlightened him, he loosed Tommy, muttered, "Larry!" and leaped away into the darkness.

BAFFLED, heavy hearted, Lobo rose from beside Lucero's body. His fingers, questing for cigaret makin's, encountered the crisp folds of the treasure map. He drew the paper out, regarded it critically. After his brief acquaintance with

Hell's Pasture, those lines took on added meaning. Interest flared in his eyes.

Very deliberately he left the room, walked down a dark hall, tried a door. It was locked. For a moment is resisted his shoulder, then flew opn. Lobo walked in, thumbed a match, touched it to the wick of a wall lamp.

The place was musty with dead air—and something else. Something pungent, fetid, gagging. As the light flared on the wick, it revealed a room destitute of furniture save the dun Mayo blankets upon the floor. On one wall hung a strange armor-like suit of uncured bullhide, riveted together in rough irregular seams. That creation intrigued Lobo but suggested nothing, so he shruggingly turned from it, puzzled that in this room, according to the map, lay the treasure of the Jaramillos, the trove of El Culebro. Here, where there was no chest or container large enough to hold a jewel, let alone a fortune.

While puzzling over this, Lobo heard a furtive footfall. He swung to the doorway, his teeth bared in a snarl. In the portal, trembling as if with an ague, stood a caricature of a man, his hollow eyes staring, his shrunken cheek muscles jerking.

"Larry!" he croaked in a toneless whisper. "Larry, me bye!"

He barred the door behind him, tottered forward. And for an instant the kid recoiled. Neither this broken creature nor his voice were familiar. But the words rang true and Lobo knew he looked at his sire. A wave of ugly thoughts engulfed him but the loyalty of blood swept them away.

"Hell," he told himself, as he had a thousand times, "Terry Larrigan ain't no dirty, yella-hided killer. No snake. He's wild, roistering and shifty of foot like all true sons of the 'auld sod.' But never a murderin' bandit."

Now he leaped forward, hand outstretched.

"Dad!"

"Me bye!"

They came together, clawing at each other, laughing, choking. Now the younger man's arms were about the one they had called the Duke in Galeyville, crushing him, shaking him. Terrence, weak with laughter and tears, hung limply in his embrace, overcome.

"Gad, sir! Ye young divil. Ye're strong a' bold as a Larrigan should be. How ye have thickened, me bye. An' the likes av ye, ridin' into hell to save yer auld fayther. 'Tis glad I am to see ye, lad, an' thankful I could live to see the dead face av that blitherin' spalpeen out yonder. Ye killed him, Larry, me bye?"

The kid nodded, still tortured by those ugly promptings that wouldn't die.

"Dad!" he eld his sire at arm's length, started as he noticed the bloody shirt. "You're hit!"

"'Tis nothin'," nodded the Duke. "'Twas wor-r-rth it, takin' one to give two in doin' the murtherin' work av El Culebro."

LOBO laughed with sudden relief. "Jake Woodruff?" he asked, eagerly. "You shot two of the snakes in that treacherous—"

"Shur-r-r-re, an' that I did, Larry. An' not the first toime I've played straight carr-rds in a rotten game."

"Why—why—" Lobo gulped. "Why are you trackin' in this snake nest, Dad. Good Lord, they're sayin' you're El Culebro."

The Duke's eyes grew misty and he straightened to his old posture.

"The lyin' yammer o' the Snake, me bye. He would have all men a'thinkin' the same. Whin I rode from Galeyville, I didn't ride far. The bullet in me chist put me out an' I fell off av me hor-r-rse. Whin I came to me sinses, I was in this hell hole. Until I was healed, me bye, they treated me foine. Then they made me par-r-rty to their crimes. Up to then I thought I was str-r-rong, Larry. But El Culebro taught me different with a split quirt."

"He beat you?" snarled Lobo.

"'Till I passed out, the spalpeen. Many's the toime. Till he'd broken me body with the lash an' weakened me brain with the stinkin' dr-r-rugs he smuggles. Till I was a cringin', crawlin' thing like you see now, Larry Bye, doin' his biddin' to escape the lash."

"Fer what?" puzzled Lobo. "What did he want?"

The Duke brushed his furrowed brow wearily.

"There's the rub, me lad, an' the stain on the name o' Larrigan. He played a

neat game, this Culebro. He knew the Rurales would come some day an' put him away. So he made a pawn, a false Culebro. An' let it be known that Terrence Larrigan was the Snake, bad 'cess to his soul, I'm not guessin', Larry. He boasted av it, bragged that it covered his tracks and would bring him a pretty bounty when he turned me in to the Rurales."

"Why didn't you escape?"

The Duke laughed acridly. "Escape, is it? There is no escape from Potrero Infierno except death. I know, me lad. Each toime I tried earned me fifty lashes an' more cocaine in my food and drink. This Snake was a human divil . . . hist!"

Terrence Larrigan cocked an ear, stiffened as someone rapped smartly on the door. His face contorted, his eyes flickered with the old fear of such visitations. He cast it off, a wan smile cracking his pinched face.

"Even afther he's dead, Larry," he apologized, "El Culebro tor-r-rtures me. But divil a whimper did I make till he broke me with the whip an' those divilish drugs."

"Was it him, El Culebro, that killed Tommy Woodruff?" asked the kid, avidly.

"Dead is it?" The Duke chuckled. "Faith an' Tommy's a moighty live corpse, me bye. Knowin' he was worth real money, the Snake trayted him foine. An' not foive minutes ago I loosed his chains so he could find his faythe r."

Lobo's thankful sigh was stilled by an insistent pounding on the door. The two whirled to face the door.

"Someone seeking the treasure of the Jaramillos," opined the Duke.

"That treasure?" queried Lobo. "Is it really here?"

"Real an' really here," nodded his sire. "Look!"

HE broke from Lobo, reeled to the center of the room, kicked aside a blanket. Now the outlines of a trap door showed clearly in the floor, with twin handles to lift it out. The Duke, a set look on his face, knelt, tugged at the panel as an authoritative order ripped from the one seeking admittance.

"Open up or I'm breakin' in!"

Heavy shoulders crashed into the door, shattered it. Again. With a screech of protesting hinges, the door burst inward and a burly form stumbled into the room. Brazos Barger, his face still swollen from ant venom, fastened snake-like eyes on Lobo who had flung about. And boothill gates swung wide in the strangler's hate-convulsed face.

"Ah, my old amigo, Lobo," he sneered. "Wasn't expectin' yore li'l' playmate, Brazos, so soon, was yuh. Didn't figger I'd learn that map like drinkin' likker? An' figgered you'd glaum yuh off a li'l' treasure? Well, well. I've got yuh trapped, feller, where yuh can't run. I wonder if you kin fight. Pull yore gun, you kioaty, an' see kin yuh earn that treasure."

His meaty hand flashed to holster. Not a lightning draw; not a slow one. With the smooth ease of the trained gun slinger, Lobo palmed his Colt's, let the hammer go on the upgo. A dead click gave answer. He had forgotten to reload the piece after the duel with Blas Lucero.

Brazos' gun flashed out, up . . . A look of gloating triumph smeared his face when he heard Lobo's weapon fail. In the haste of desperation, the kid hurled himself in, letting the momentum of his charge catapult his gun in a savage underhand sweep. A hundred to one shot, but the missile sailed true, hit the strangler's forearm, knocked the gun from his paralyzed fingers just as the piece exploded. The ball went wide.

Lobo's lunge carried him close to Brazos, who lashed out to grip him. The kid swerved desperately, vainly. Like the looping coils of *culebra de ague* the great Mexican water snake, the stranger's massive arms encircled him chokingly.

Lobo gasped, tried to fight with fists, feet, teeth, for his very life. But it was like trying to fight back against an enraged grizzly. Weak from loss of blood, feverish from open wounds that sapped his strength, Lobo was helpless in the man's constrictor embrace. And those great hairy talons were sneaking up his body to his throat.

"Feed me to the ants, will yuh?" snarled the strangler, his eyes filled with murder. "Now it's my turn. Like I told yuh, I'm killin' yuh with my hands, slow, s-l-o-w."

Dead air stagnated in Lobo's lungs. His ribs were cracking under the terrific strain. He was suddenly very weary . . . done.

The red haze of death was gathering in his eyes. Before his fading vision loomed the snarling, snag-tooth visage of the strangler. In his nostrils was the man's fetid breath. And those groping, steel-thewed fingers were at his jugular.

XII

THE Duke had succeeded in jerking loose the trap door when his drug-numbed brain warned him of Lobo's danger. With strength drawn from deep reserves, the broken man leaped up, lifted the secret panel, ran forward and brought it down on Brazos' bullet head. In the hands of a strong man it would have been a death blow. As it was, it jarred the strangler, broke his death hold on the kid.

Too far gone to know exactly what had happened, Lobo inhaled a lungful of sweet life-giving air that cleared his brain. Exerting the last vestige of his strength, he broke free just as Brazos lashed out and knocked the Duke spinning. With a wild swing to the jaw, the kid staggered Brazos and fell down himself from the shock. Then the strangler turned his attention again upon the one who had fed him to the ants, flashed in with head settled, with fingers hooked and groping. Death chuckled, but Fate ordained that Lobo should never again feel the clutch of those killer talons.

Off the floor crawled a broken derelict, sobbing, shaken, his face a bloody welter from Brazos' fist. With a pitiful reflection of his one-time strength, he leaped, crashed into the strangler, clamped him like a leach. Thin legs wrapped desperately about thick stumpy ones and Brazos went down. Locked in a death embrace, two men rolled over and over, hung a moment at the edge of the floor opening, then plunged into the treasure trove.

Lobo saw it all, had no time to scream a warning before they were gone. With a horrified cry, he leaped up, started for the spot, but sprawled as black vertigo hit him. Lying upon his face, a nauseous stink stabbed through his faintness and in his ears was an insidious, commanding vibration that carried at once a dread threat and an awful warning.

Now a thin piercing scream rifled from the pit, filled the room, beat in shuddery echoes across Hell's Pasture. A high-pitched inhuman scream that was all too human in its hopelessness. That strangled cachination was born in stark fear, rose to the heights of dread and agony, tailed out in a croak of despair.

Heart in his mouth, Lobo shook himself, crawled toward the lip of the hole. His limbs were like lead; his senses reeled. His strength was pouring from him like sugar from a rent sack. It took so much muscle to make that crawl.

A head appeared at the hole, rose slowly. Terrence Larrigan stared at the kid, a vacant smile upon his face, his eyes glassy.

"Larry!" he breathed, as if he were in terrible pain. "Larry, me bye. I'm proud that afther all these years I can do somethin' fer ye—ye young spalpeen."

Lobo choked. "An'—an' me, Dad," he muttered, his voice sounding weak and hollow, "I'm shore proud you ain't what they claimed; proud that yuh took the cards they dealt yuh an' played 'em fair, without squawkin'. That yuh stayed a Larrigan in spite uh dope, the lash an' the tortures uh hell. I'm proud, Dad, that yuh've give me somethin' tuh live up to."

The Duke nodded. For a long moment they stared, each into the soul of the other. Then some gripping agony seized Terrence Larrigan. His teeth drew blood from his lip. He strove to hang to the ladder upon which he stood, failed. Lobo heard his body fall and was again conscious of that subdued vibration.

Sobbing, shaken, the kid wiggled to the floor trap, peered down. When his eyes had become used to the gloom, he made out two bodies, laying side by side. And over them and all about them, rippling, undulating streams of checkered horror. The air was putrid with the characteristic effluvia of reptile bodies. The air drummed with the whirring beat of their cascabels.

"Buzztails!" muttered the kid and shuddered. Now he knew the meaning of those blackened corpses hanging face down in the trail, the purpose of that cowhide armor on the wall. Now he understood El Culebro's vague boast, "The venom of the fang lives after the snake is dead!"

Lobo's eyes fell upon the trap door. Painfully, laboriously, he slid it to him. After aeons of effort, it slid into place. Then with tottering senses, the kid arranged the rug over it. To him it seemed

fitting that he cover up what lay below. Then, with a weary sigh, he sprawled on his face, passed out.

DAWN was paling the east when Lobo snapped out of it. He lay on the couch in the main room of the Snake's headquarters. A crackling fire on the hearth warmed his bloodless body with a grateful heat. A wet bandana sponged his face and someone trickled whisky down his throat. The fiery liquid burned, shocking him awake.

"He's comin' to, boys!" It was Jake Woodruff's voice. "Hey, Larry! Know me kid?"

Lobo's eyes fluttered open. "How kin I ever forget yuh, Jake?" he asked bitterly. "That's a foolish question."

Complete consciousness cleared his vision. They were standing about him. Like buzzards, he figured, about a carcass. At his feet stood big John Ringo, regarding him with a cynical smile. That grimace, the fearless message radiating from the eyes of one too brave to shoot himself, was to Lobo like the pat on the head to a friendless dog, like the bold comfort of a shot of red likker.

"Hell's cats and kittens," gruffed the renegade. "What a wolf you turned out to be. How do you feel?"

"Rocky," grinned the kid. "How come you're here?"

"You needed me. I came."

"Needed hell," roared a voice from the doorway, and Stormy Sanders came tramping in from outside. "That kid don't need nobody but me. Us two is worse'n a flock uh wildcats on a hellbender. H're yuh, kid. Yuh look like somethin' outa the slaughter house."

"Yeah?" sang out Lobo. "Well, yuh salty ol' badger, I ain't dead an' I'm gettin' better fast. Pay me that two-bits now."

"Not till yo're on yore feet, I won't," grinned the oldster. "An' I'll bet yuh two-bits yuh don't c'lect it then."

"Take yuh, Stormy. I'll wring them four bits outa yuh, if I have tuh give yuh the ol' ant treatment."

Stormy glanced admiringly about the ring. "He'll do it, too. You win, kid, but listen. I choked the truth outa one uh them bandidos. He come clean, 'lowed our ol' amigo Blas Lucero is El Culebro. Told me Terry Larrigan was a plant tuh drag down the big rewards fer the Snake. Kin yuh tie that fer good news?"

"It's true," chipped in Jake Woodruff, soberly. "Tommy's jest told me the same thing, made me feel like a mangy coyote. Kid—" he laid a friendly hand on Lobo's shoulder. "—it 'pears like God's still makin' men like you. An' dang fools like me. Kin yuh forgive an ol' man what made a bad mistake an' hones tuh right it."

Lobo nodded, his eyes misty. He was thinking of the Hatchet Ranch, Mother Woodruff and brown-eyed Bonny. Before he could answer, John Ringo stepped in and wrung his hand.

"That's the stuff, kid. Never hold a grudge. But I'm disappointed in you, at that. I thought you promised me to quit the wild stuff, settle down and get an education. And here I find you battling for a mythical buried treasure."

"He didn't tell you no part of a lie, Ringo," explained Jake Woodruff. "He's settled down and was getting his education till I upset it. Now he's going back an' finish what he started. He's comin' back to the Hatchet with us an' I won't take 'no' fer an answer. That right, Lobo?"

The kid's eyes sparkled. "That go fer Stormy, too?"

"Me?" yelped the old cow dog, and slapped his leg. "I'll tell a man. Jake's already signed me on at a straw boss' wages. Yep, the ol' Hatchet couldn't run right without Stormy Sanders."

"How 'bout yuh, kid?" from Jake Woodruff, eagerly.

"Take him up, Lobo," said John Ringo. "an' I'll be going, sure that you're in good hands. Listen." From outside drifted the clatter of hoofs and horns, the shrill yipping of horsemen. "The Jaramillo beef herd, rustled by El Culebro. The treasure may be a joke, but there's no joke about the value of that herd. I'm taking it across the line to make a home for it. So long, kid. Call me when yuh need me. Adios, men."

The big renegade with the sad eyes strode from the room. Stormy's eyes were narrowed, thoughtful.

"The big feller's wrong about that treasure," he spat, stiffly. "Near as I kin figger it out, the loot's gone. Brazos Barger brung Ringo here an' he's disappeared.

He's got out with the stuff, shore as a .45. An' kid, yore dad's tailin' him or I'm a locoed yearlin'. Both them fellers is gone an' we can't find hide nor hair of 'em. Yes sir, the treasure's lifted an' I was figgerin' on givin' my girl one uh them big rubies."

"Who?" chuckled Jake Woodruff, "that Apache squaw at Benson?"

When the laughter had died, Stormy's face sobered. "No foolin' though, Lobo. It looks downright bad fer ol' lady Montoya. It we ever are able to do anything fer her, I'll betcha two bits we pays it outa our wages."

"I'll take yuh," grinned Lobo, raising to one elbow. "An' that makes six bits yuh owe me."

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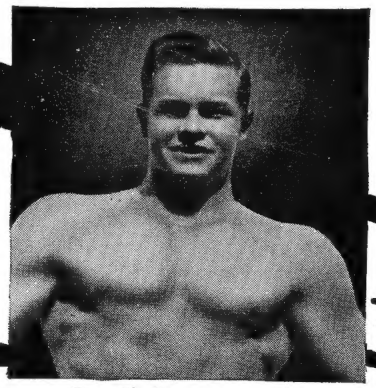

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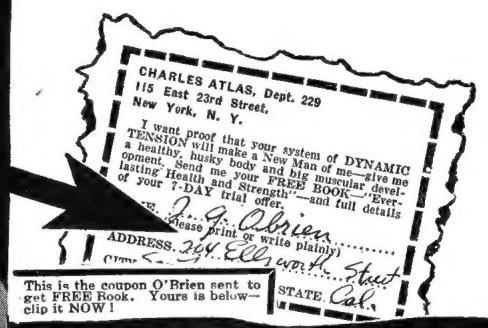
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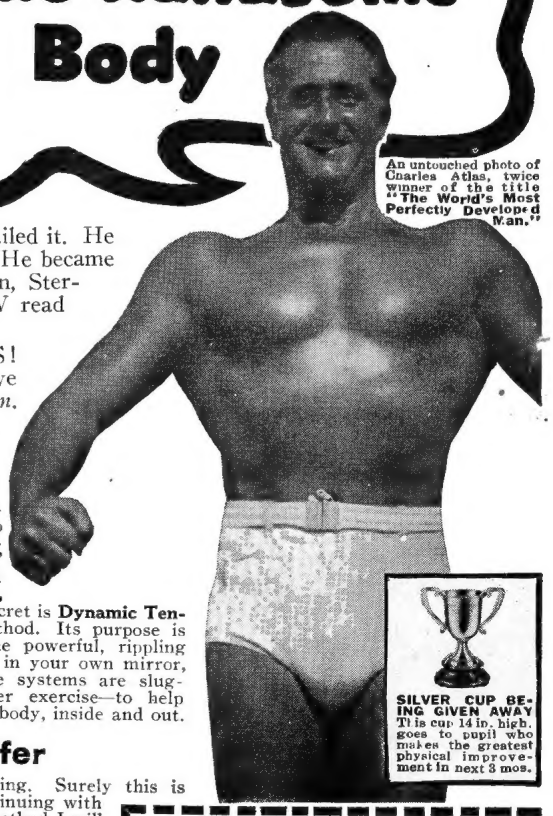

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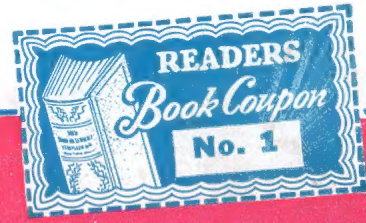

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